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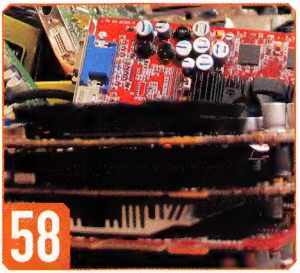

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Empire of the Epic

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EDITORIAL
Editor-in-Chief
Steve Bauman
sbauman@cgonline.com
Features Editor
Cindy Yans
cyans@cgonline.com
Contributing Editors
Tom Chick
Tiffany Martin

ART/PRODUCTION
Associate Art Director
Scott Wild
swild@cgonline.com
Graphic Designer
Ryan Cohen
Technology
Liz Halgas

ADVERTISING CONTACTS
Advertising Director
Jayson Dubin
(954) 377-7934
jdubin@cgonline.com
Eastern Sales Manager
Andrew Reedman
(201) 961-4902
areedman@cgonline.com
Western Sales Manager
Jeff Lubetkin
(818) 222-7516
jlubetkin@cgonline.com

theglobe.com
Chairman & CEO
Michael Egan
President
Edward Cespedes

games.theglobe.com
President & Publisher
Douglas Brisotti
Associate Publisher
Jayson Dubin

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PO Box 1965, Marion, OH 43306-8065

One year (12 issues) Basic Rate US: $19.97 or $29.97 with CD **Canada:** $31.97 or $41.97 with CD **Foreign:** $43.97 or $53.97 with CD

Back issues available @ 800-699-4263

Distributor: Curtis Circulation Co.
201-634-7400

Reprints available. Foreign reprint rights available.

Editorial Offices:
65 Millet Street, Suite 203
Richmond, VT 05477
802-434-3060 FAX: 802-434-6493
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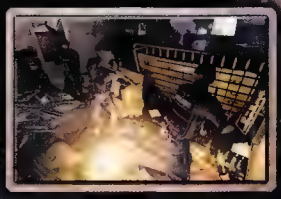

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Apocalypse Now!

Presenting, the seventh sign of our impending doom

by Steve Bauman

The first sign of the apocalypse occurred in 1991, when this magazine added "Computer Games" to its name. (At the time, it was just called "Strategy Plus.") In addition to producing history's most awkward logo, name, and acronym (*Computer Games Strategy Plus*, or *CGS+*… not pretty), it signaled a trend that we were moving away from coverage of boardgames to the frivolous, primitive, crude, and clearly "below us" world of computer games. Letters were written, hands were wringed, and placements of various parts of our anatomy in other parts were suggested.

The second sign was when we did our first major redesign in 1995. This signaled a trend that we were moving away from "serious, thoughtful coverage" toward more frivolous pursuits. Letters were written, hands were wringed, and placements of various parts of our anatomy in other parts were suggested.

The third sign was when we redesigned the logo in 1996, making "Computer Games" more prominent than "Strategy Plus." Letters were written, hands were wringed, etc.

The fourth sign was when we picked *Tomb Raider* as "Game of the Year" for 1996, though the award was actually given in 1997. Letters were written, blah blah blah, and we were accused of letting breasts get in the way of our good judgment. (In retrospect, since we chose that game over *Civilization II* and *Diablo*, people were probably right.)

The fifth sign was when we removed "Strategy Plus" altogether in 1999. Letters, etc. There was probably a sixth sign somewhere between 1999 and 2005, but we're pretty sure some will find the seventh sign in our console game section on page 78. "So what are console games doing in my computer game magazine?" you may be asking.

It's a fair question. The truth is, we already cover console games. Is *Splinter Cell* a PC game? How about *Grand Theft Auto*, which debuted on the PC? What about the latest *Madden*, or *Prince of Persia*, or the next *Rainbow Six*? What about some of your favorite developers, who are now working on console and PC games? Should we ignore what Blizzard, BioWare, and Raven are doing for other platforms?

The PC has essentially become the home of first-person shooters, real-time strategy games, and MMOs. I'd be lying if I said I thought that was good thing—it's way too narrow a selection for my own gaming tastes. But oddly enough, old-school PC gamers can find many of their favorite genres on consoles nowadays. But some are stubborn, dismissing all console games as simple and trite. It makes you wonder if they're aware of all of the old-school RPGs and turn-based strategy games like *Disagea* and *La Pucelle: Tactics*, or even hex-based wargames like *Dai Senryaku*, that are available for consoles?

That's what we hope to do, showcase some console games that hardcore PC gamers may not be aware of. Sure, we'll still cover games like *Gran Tourismo 4*, but in general, it will focus on the titles we think readers will find most interesting. You may see some score inflation, solely because we're not wasting space covering every marginal movie cash-in or "yet another [fill in the genre]," but the section will be written in the style of which you're accustomed. (Which should make the coverage radically different from console game magazines.)

The section won't compromise our PC game coverage, however. Consider that the month before covering consoles, we added sections devoted to MMOs and indie games. We realize that not all of our readers are fans of those categories, but we're acknowledging that they have followings (of varying sizes), and are worth covering. (If you look in this month's Rebound, you'll find that some people don't think MMOs are "real" games because they don't offer single-player.)

Consider this: I've been playing videogames since I was a little kid. I started with consoles—an Atari Pong, then a VCS—before getting an Atari 800 computer, then my first PC in 1987. During that same period, I was throwing quarters into every single arcade machine I could find, from *Asteroids* to *R-Type* to *Punch Out* to an inexplicable obsession with *Pooyan*. I've owned multiple consoles over the years, though I wouldn't really have called myself a console gamer.

As far as I'm concerned, the distinction is irrelevant. There's no PC vs. consoles, there are just games that require a PC and others that require an Xbox. Some games you play on your couch, others you play at your desk. And some are best with a gamepad, while others are designed for mouse/keyboard.

Computer Games Magazine will never be a console magazine; I believe we can, however, deliver interesting, entertaining, and informative articles that point out some of the games on alternate platforms that are worth checking out. There are too many talented people out there making superb games for all platforms—to completely ignore consoles is to miss out on some of the great pleasures to be had with games today. ■

"There's no PC vs. consoles, there are just games that require a PC and others that require an Xbox."

We had a serious e-mail issue in December that wasn't noticed until mid-February (hey, we were busy), so any letters sent to rebound@cgonline.com or editor@cgonline.com probably went to some guy in Nigeria. We'll send them our checking account information as an apology. Anyway, once the problem was fixed, we received a flood of e-mail about our Top 10 Games of 2004. Seems a lot of people don't even think an MMO should get any consideration, which is a little... baffling. But the majority of people who weren't complaining about World of WarCraft were upset with us having the audacity to call *Half-Life 2* the fourth best game of 2004.

World of WarringCraft Pick

So, let me get this straight: you choose as your "Game of the Year" one I have to: (A) pay $50 just to take home; (B) subscribe for an additional $15/month just to play; and (C) can't play offline by myself at my leisure?

What the hell is wrong with you guys? I don't care how great an MMO is, it doesn't deserve GOTY if it doesn't offer any single-player gameplay. I may be part of a dying breed, but I like to immerse myself in computer games to get away from the people I have to deal with in everyday life.

Give it the top spot for its category (best MMO), but save the big title for something more deserving and more accessible, like *Half-Life 2* or even *The Sims 2*. **–Alex Nikolai**

Welcome to 1997. –ed

Painful Pick

I can understand picking *World of WarCraft* as "Game of the Year." I can understand picking *Pirates!* second. But I have no idea how you could possibly have put *Painkiller* above *Half-Life 2*.

According to your own articles, the only thing it had going for it was fun. You admitted it wasn't original or creative, but that it was fun anyway. So, while fun is a good trait in a game, I would argue that *Half-Life 2* is just as much fun. Plus it was original. Plus the graphics and physics were the best in any game in the top 10. Plus, it continued the excellence of the original *Half-Life*. Plus, just about every other person in the gaming world thinks it's the best game of the year.

So, why did it get fourth? Is it because Steam is the devil? Or is this just a marketing trick to get more people to buy this magazine? "Oh, dude, did you hear how CGM gave *Half-Life 2* second place? That's cold man, cold."

Either way, *Half-Life 2* was the best shooter of the year. Whether or not you decide to take that official line is up to you. **–Bryan Jonsson**

If it was that easy to get people to buy the magazine, we'd be the official "We hate Half-Life 2" magazine, even though we wouldn't really mean it. –ed

Steamed Pick

Using Steam as a justification for ranking *Half-Life 2* at #4 is outrageous! I was in utter shock to see that you are the only magazine to rate this game so low! *World of WarCraft* #1? Come on guys! Isn't this an MMO? Don't you have to play this one online? That is a little hypocritical don't you think?

Half-Life 2 set a new standard for graphics, gameplay, and once again, graphics. Sorry guys, you blew it big-time on this one. What are you all smoking anyway? **–Christina Clements**

Who said anything about Steam having any impact on the order of our Top 10? It certainly wasn't anywhere in the text. –ed

Bold Pick

Thanks for having the cojones not to name *Half-Life 2* "Game of the Year." Obviously it's difficult, if not silly, to compare games like *Half-Life 2* and *Pirates!*. Of course, your readers demand you choose, and I applaud you for being honest in what you think was more fun.

It was a fantastic year in computer games; now I just have to sit and wait for *Day of Defeat Source*, *Fallout 3* and *Elder Scrolls: Oblivion* to come out. **–Ryan Adams**

Hated Everything Pick

I looked at this year's "Game of the Year" awards and was struck with the answer to why my wife and I were unable to find anything but garbage in the computer games section of *Best Buy* yesterday; that's just about all that was put out last year.

Out of the the years "Ten Best Games," exactly one has earned my money; *The Sims 2*. One more will earn a bit of hard drive space when it drops in price and into the bargain bin, and that's *Sid Meier's Pirates!*. *Kohan 2* had a chance, but I found the original so-so. Other than *Rome*, everything else was either a first-person shooter or an MMO.

For the love of Games, please talk to some of the game developers and ask them to stop cranking out just FPS and MMO games. I can't stand not having any games to play; I've bought over 600 in the past 23 years. I can't continue to go to Home of the Underdogs forever to get my game on! **–Bill Ward**

> **"I may be part of a dying breed, but I like to immerse myself in computer games to get away from the people I have to deal with in everyday life."**

What's Next for WoW

Ok. I'm getting tired of all the hype about *WoW*, especially since a lot of it is unfounded. Let's take the example from the article. Here's the quote from Rob Pardo I take issue with: "There's not really an MMO that's doing anything similar to what we're trying to do with our world events because most games at this point have either done the *Asheron's Call* thing, which is the huge, unfolding story that they do every month. And then you have the *EverQuest* or *Ultima Online* examples, where you have GM-run event stuff."

Interesting. Has no one ever bothered playing *Final Fantasy XI*? They've been doing the same sort of thing at least since their US launch in Oct. 2003. I've played both games, and I don't see anything much in *WoW* that's new and original. It's no different and no better than any of the other MMOs I've played. It's certainly the least stable, with random disconnects and rollbacks on a regular basis. Yesterday, there was extended downtime on a large number of servers because the database wasn't connected properly. I think they need to spend less on advertising and more on getting a stable game that does what they keep claiming. **–Glenda McCarthy**

> **"Maybe you guys should start reading your own magazine."**

Top Sellers

All right, I realize after reading this magazine for a little while most everyone there must really love MMOs, despite the fact that they are the bane of all good gaming. But that's another issue.

What bugged me is the "Top Sellers" sidebar. *World of WarCraft* came out on top, with *Half-Life 2* at number two. There was added a pro-MMO little blurb about the clash of titans and an MMO coming on top.

Then as I look down the list, what is at 14 but *Half-Life 2 Collector's Edition*? Hmmm, I guess it must be an entirely different game. I mean, of course, most developers make collector's editions that are completely different that they must be rated separately. How stupid I must be, I better run out and buy it because I'm sure it'll be nothing like my regular old *Half-Life 2*!

Can you hear the sarcasm? Was that an intentional deception or whoever put together that sidebar have the attention span of a flea? Maybe you guys should start reading your own magazine.
–John Bagnoli

World of WarCraft Collector's Edition *came in at number 6, so I'm thinking* WoW *actually won twice. –ed*

Fable Foibles

With regards to Ken Levine's column about gamers being too harsh when criticizing *Fable*, I have this to say: The big complaint isn't about the lack of growing trees. We were promised the greatest role-playing game of all time. We were promised an epic adventure in which you started out as a young boy and the game continued well into the character's adult life, where "every choice has a consequence."

What we got was a ten-hour hack-and-slash. What we got was the ability to walk around and burp and fart, with a goal of either impressing of scaring the locals. What we got were dialog boxes that simply asked if the player was ready to become a teenager, and adult, etc.

This game is anything but epic. The reason this game was so overhyped and lauded about the revolutionary features was to drum up sales. Mr. Molyneaux was quoted in several magazines regarding the epic adventure elements of *Fable* just weeks before its release. To suggest that the developers had built an epic adventure with all these revolutionary features. only to have to remove them at the last minute, is bullshit. He said the same types of things about *Black & White* and he'll say it again about his next game. **–Chris Champion**

Still Steamed

I loved reading all the letters from people steamed over Steam, but the problem is that they were from people who actually purchased *Half-Life 2*. Here is what Valve really needs to hear a lot more of: I bought *Doom 3*, *Painkiller*, *Far Cry*, *Rome: Total War*, *Call of Duty: United Offensive*, and several other top-selling games in the past year. I bought and loved *Half-Life*. And I want to love *Half-Life 2*. But I have not, and will not, buy *Half-Life 2*. Because of Steam. No sale.
–Kevin Donn

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A Gamer Looks at Forty

By Reed Hubbard

For most of my life, I've had a fascination with videogames. I have dropped a fortune in arcade machines, purchased several console systems, and regularly updated or replaced my home computer, all for the purpose of satisfying my gaming desires. This behavior may not seem out of the ordinary for a young American male, but I am no longer young. This past month I turned 40.

Forty. The Big Four Oh. Black streamers in my office and a, "Lordy, lordy, look who's 40!" sign on my door. Not the high point of many people's lives, and certainly a grim marker for a man who hunkers down nightly behind his flat panel, killing monsters and hunting treasure alongside teenagers and college students.

But life begins at 40, right? At least that's what I hear, mostly from those well past the four-decade mark. I'm not sure if life begins at forty, but youth definitely ends there. The only time a 40-year-old is referred to as young is when he's doing things normally reserved for a 65-year-old, like running a corporation or having chest pains. When it comes to gaming, forty is, in many peoples' view, too old.

But still I sit here at my desk, knowing that most men my age are golfing or watching football while I hunt electronic targets. They get excited about a nice drive or a touchdown run. I get thrilled by a rare drop or a headshot. Don't get me wrong, I like sports and other things, but, given the choice, I'm going to be at my computer navigating Gordon Freeman through City 17.

In fact, I have what most Americans would consider a normal life. I have a wife and daughter. I've lived in the same city most of my life, am gainfully employed, and attend church on Sunday. The closest gaming ever came to causing a real problem was when my wife stormed into my home office demanding a second telephone line because she was sick of me tying up our phone playing *EverQuest*. It wasn't long until we got DSL and everything was fine.

But there's still that nagging feeling that I'm not supposed to be doing this, you know, at my age. The funny thing is that it's mostly coming from me. Turning forty is only as big a deal as the individual makes it, and I guess I'm making a pretty big deal out of it. Forty always seemed so old. I remember in high school when one of my friends' parents turned that age. She was ancient in my eyes. Time has passed, and now I'm there, and it doesn't seem so old anymore.

> **"The only time a 40-year-old is referred to as young is when he's doing things normally reserved for a 65-year-old, like running a corporation or having chest pains."**

In fact, it really isn't. And what I'm finding is that there are a greater number of adult gamers out there than I originally thought. When playing *World of WarCraft* or *Counter-strike*, it's easy to pick out the grown-ups by the way they talk, like beacons of maturity in storms of leetspeak. Their posts on chatboards are not full of profanity or laced with childish insults toward someone who happens to hold an opposing viewpoint. They don't whine about how loot should be split after a raid. In short, they're the people with whom I want to play.

Most gamers are kids in their teens and early twenties, and it will likely always be that way. However, the first generation that grew up with videogames is just starting to hit middle age, so it makes sense that there aren't as many of us out there. Still, older gamers are necessary in a virtual world overrun with youngsters. We serve as a mature counterbalance to those who are assuaging youthful angst through electronic violence.

Gaming has given back to me as well. I connect with the younger guys at work, who seem pleasantly surprised that this old guy knows about *Doom 3* and *Final Fantasy XI*. My seven-year-old daughter loves it when I play GameBoy games with her, or when she can sit on daddy's lap and kill a few Orcs. And while many 40-year-olds are rotting their brains nightly watching some inane reality show, I'm interacting with people of all ages.

It's a symbiotic relationship, and I have certainly seen the benefit. So, I'll continue to play games into my forties and beyond. And for those of you fast approaching the top of the hill, fear not. We can always use another levelheaded grown-up in the virtual arena. ■

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Look for more realistic AI and natural behavior in the troops, such as these men who've decided to hitch a ride to the front. (inset) British Tommies take part in street fighting in North Africa.

Return to Duty

Multiple paths to success should be the key to victory in **Call of Duty 2** BY PETER SUCIU

Developer Infinity Ward **Publisher** Activision
Release Date Fall 2005
It's Like: Call of Duty, duh
The Buzz: Choosing the path of least resistance has never really been an option in first-person shooters. So, you'll notice that things have changed when you return to duty to face heavy opposition in the desert stronghold of Toujane in North Africa. The Tunisian town, near the heavily fortified Mareth Line, is causing the British 7th Armoured Division's offensive against the German Afrika Korp to grind to a halt. You'll have to advance and take out the enemy anti-tank guns so that the British tanks can get moving.

Going straight up the street could be nasty. A German position covers the desert village street with an MG-34, while support troops on the rooftops are calling-in artillery support. The enemy is well-armed with Panzerfaust and Panzerschreck anti-tank weapons, while Panzer II tanks are advancing to further hinder your assault.

Just a few years ago, your only option would have been a linear one, with a bit of scripted elements to make it seem more dynamic. But with *Call of Duty 2*, the sequel to the acclaimed World War II shooter, how you decide to complete your objectives is up to you. And while you still have a series of objectives to complete, the developers at Infinity Ward are working hard to make it seem as non-linear as possible. (The developer isn't saying anything about the multiplayer at this point.)

Accurate kits, shoulder patches, and even the helmet net help make for more convincing skins in Call of Duty 2.

"You have four stars on your compass for each of your objectives," says lead designer Zied Rieke, adding that you can go straight up the street should you decide to take the Germans head on. Or you can choose to flank from the right or left. In the case of Toujane you can even get up on those rooftops for a better view of the village, and to each objective you'll have multiple routes and face a different set of challenges.

The Desert Rats take the fight to Rommel's Afrika Korp in Libya.

> **"Infinity Ward is working hard to make it seem as non-linear as possible."**

Scheduled for a fall release, the basic formula will remain the same. Taking place this time fully in chronological order, it begins in December of 1941 with the crucial battle of Moscow. You'll play yet another Soviet grunt fighting the Nazi invaders in a mix of rural and urban settings. Then the action shifts to North Africa in 1942 at the epic battle of El Alamein, as you join-up with the British 7th Armoured Division. You'll stick with the famed Desert Rats and take part in the Battle of the Hedgerows following the Normandy landings, before completing the game in the services of the American 2nd Rangers in France and Germany.

Call of Duty 2 is being built around a brand-new engine, and will feature maps that the team says are almost three times larger than those in the original. Besides offering multiple routes to complete objectives, Rieke says these locations will also feel more natural and realistic. Each of the levels will be longer, and the team says that they'll be able to deliver even more of them, with close to 30 in the final game versus about 20 in the original. Where the original engine placed buildings and other objects on a static grid, the new engine uses more winding roads to better simulate the real-world environments.

To achieve this level of detail, artists were sent to France and North Africa to photograph the scenery, study maps, and talk to the locals. In fact, on the return to the studios the team went so far as to throw out their existing maps for the campaigns in France. "What we had looked like the French levels in the first game," says lead artist

Call of Duty 2 features such improved foliage you can almost smell the trees on the French countryside.

The new engine helps create [illegible] surroundings and environments, [illegible] what lies around the next bend in the road.

Michael Boone. "It turns out that France doesn't look like that."

Infinity Ward is also working hard to make sure there will be plenty of small graphical enhancements. For example, trees and shutters on buildings will not only move, but will cast real-time shadows. But the biggest graphical improvement will no-doubt be the inclusion of smoke, which will have a feathering effect so that it better blends with the surrounding environment and terrain.

Although this might not seem that important, it'll allow it to play a much bigger role in the game, with smoke grenades being part of the standard equipment loadout.

"We had the opportunity to work with military advisors from the beginning this time around," explains Grant Collier, president of Infinity Ward, emphasizing that the advisors prodded the developers on the crucial elements of the smoke issue. "It lends itself to the dramatic feel of the game, and makes it feel very cinematic, as well as being really damn useful."

Additionally, the advisors—who included John Hillen, an authority on warfare and decorated combat veteran, and Hank Keirsey, a retired Army Colonel, decorated combat veteran and authority on World War II military history—stressed that few games have captured the sights and sounds of battle. "The big thing that they've been pushing is that once the first shot is fired the battle isn't quiet," says Collier. "People are talking. This is where the battle chat comes in."

This new feature, which should help make squad members feel more like fellow soldiers than AI, will have them calling out what they're seeing. If the Germans are flanking you while you're defending one position, you'll hear from the others in the squads rather than other games' typical orders that send you off to complete yet another objective.

Another notable change is that you'll finally have the ability to actually climb over things like short walls. This "mantling" will be done by hitting the use key, and allows you to pull yourself over a wall or fence. Taller walls, barbed wire, and mine fields will continue to act as boundaries for the edge of the world. The enemy AI is also being improved, with soldiers operating more like teams.

Rieke points to other details having a significant impact on the single-player experience. "You'll see guys riding on top of the tanks into combat just like they really did, and the troops will use the tanks as cover as they advance," says Rieke. All these subtle improvements should help deliver an even richer experience. War may be hell, but fans probably can't wait to get back to the front. ■

What your hero sees.

Rise and Fall: Civilizations at War

You're going in

Developer Stainless Steel Studios **Publisher** Midway **Release Date** Winter 2005

It's Like: Age of Empires at eye level

The Buzz: "This is a very, very, very delicate balance," says Rick Goodman, the founder of Stainless Steel Studios. He's showing off the hero command mode in *Rise and Fall*, the developer's latest real-time strategy game. If you'd come late into the demonstration, you'd think you were looking at some sort of action game played from a third-person perspective. You're looking over the shoulder of Alexander the Great while he cuts through swathes of common soldiers and then raises his bow to pick off some archers standing on a wall. He climbs a ladder onto the wall and looks out over a vista of battling armies. This is a real-time strategy game?

"We've looked at what gamers enjoy in an RTS," Goodman says. "They enjoy zooming down in, to that really close-in view. They love that and they ask us, 'What can I do in this view?' and the answer has always been, 'Well, nothing really.' But we want to marry that view with the fact that people like being heroes."

While playing *Rise and Fall*, you'll have a hero character who, in the mid- to late-game, will get a limited amount of stamina to use. This will let the player drop down into hero command mode, where he has direct control of the hero, who is particularly devastating against enemy units. A hero can single-handedly turn the tide in an encounter, but the amount of time you can spend down here depends on his stamina, which will only replenish very slowly. Goodman says you'll only be in this mode for very brief periods in a multiplayer game, but there's more leeway to play with it for the single-player campaigns.

"Imagine you're Cleopatra and you've got to get down the Nile to get some reinforcements, but there are archers all along the banks. We could have a scenario where you have to take out those archers as you go down the river." Although this sounds like every rail mission you hated in a first-person shooter, Goodman stresses that *Rise and Fall* isn't an action game. "This is not a hybrid. This is an RTS where the superweapon is not an ion cannon. The superweapon is you."

The game takes place entirely in ancient historical times, with a more serious angle than Stainless Steel's last historical RTS, *Empires: Dawn of the Modern World*, which granted each civilization god-like spell powers. *Rise and Fall* will include some unique weapons, such as an Archimedes claw that upends boats and siege weapons,

Elephants in the rear are no laughing matter.

or a naval ram that can administer an instant kill to any enemy boat if you line up your attack just right.

Goodman says the resource model is a mix of traditional and innovative. The traditional stuff involves peons harvesting typical goods like wood and gold. But the innovative involves territory and glory. There will be a number of outposts scattered around the map that you can capture to represent territorial control. Each will multiply the number of units you create. So when you go to the barracks and train an archer, if you control ten outposts, you'll get ten archers. This means controlling territory is directly proportional to how effectively you can translate your resources into fighting power.

The other economic innovation is the concept of glory, a resource you earn by fighting battles, building structures, and exploring. You spend your glory improving your units, upgrading your hero, or hiring advisors. You can advance your hero's level, which is roughly analogous to "aging up," and will unlock new units and buildings. Advisors are an anthropomorphic replacement for technology. For instance, a scribe relates your achievements and therefore increases your glory income. A woodlands manager means your workers don't have to actually carry wood back to a base for you to collect it. A fletcher lets archers shoot farther. You can hire tax collectors, priests, map makers, or used chariot dealers. Each of *Rise and Fall*'s four civilizations (Greece, Rome, Egypt, and Persia) will have unique advisors. "The idea is that 'Hey, I have these people and they're my friends.' We're taking a more personal approach," Goodman says.

Rise and Fall is built from an upgraded version of the engine Stainless Steel used in *Empires*, and they've obviously put a lot of work into the spectacle of elephants flinging troops, men falling off sinking ships, and heroes wading into battle. And with your short bursts of heroic command mode, Stainless Steel has made sure you'll get to enjoy it up close. **–Tom Chick**

Gauntlet: Seven Sorrows

Developer/Publisher Midway **Release Date** Winter 2005

The Buzz: Remember the cheery cartoon world of *Gauntlet*, with its swarms of monsters, powerful potions, and goofy characters? Well, this isn't that *Gauntlet*. *Seven Sorrows* is a story-driven, multiplayer-oriented fantasy RPG/action game with the entirely earnest look of a typical fantasy RPG. Built from a fairly ambitious engine, the trade-off for the graphics seems to be a limit to how many monsters can be onscreen at once. Although you can play single-player, there are some distinctly multiplayer tricks, like stretching a wall of flame between two characters and sweeping the board, or coordinating characters to move with markers that fire off a killer spell. The Valkyrie's flock attack is a little minigame, where you direct birds with quick button presses. And there are no potions or food; instead, all monsters drop a little health when you kill them.

Sacre-BLEW!

Cossacks II: Napoleonic Wars

Irresistible forces, meet immovable objects

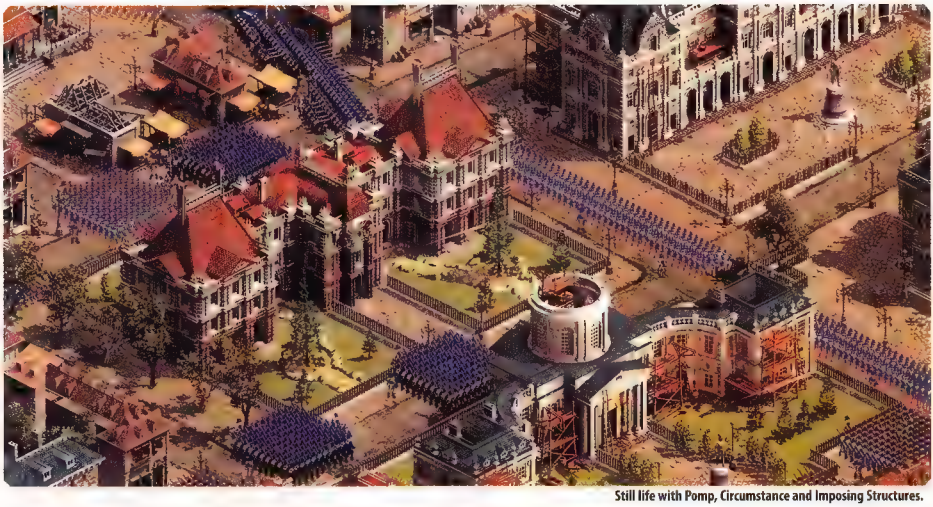
Developer GSC Game World **Publisher** CDV Software **Release Date** April 2005

It's Like: Tipsy History Channel Napoleon Week

The Buzz: *Cossacks II: Napoleonic Wars* is the sequel to the *Cossacks: European Wars*. Developed with a brand-new 3D engine, it focuses on the six player nations that shaped the Napoleonic era: France, Britain, Russia, Austria, Prussia, and Egypt. An era that marked the onset of advanced battlefield tactics—an assertion with which the ancient Romans might well take some issue—the Napoleonic Wars saw widespread employment of formation-based combat.

RTS gamers who've become used to turning the tide of battle with small, loose knots of troops running amok on the battlefield are in for some rude surprises here. *Cossacks II* makes liberal, critical use of formations, and also offers fatigue, morale, and experience schemes that reinforce and emphasize the value of the large, coordinated military unit over that of the individual Rambo-style soldier.

To this end, groupings of soldiers exceeding 120 or so can become exponentially more effective than equal numbers of "loose" units, gaining invaluable benefits such as drummers/officers/medics—who can't be individually picked off until the attrition becomes relatively high—alternating-row rifle volleys, and the sheer battlefield confidence that comes with numbers. There will also be many specialty units with their own advantages; lone priests cannot officially join a regiment for the mutual protection bonuses it provides, but they can follow its men around and periodically bless them with an *esprit de corps* morale boost. The game's namesake Cossacks, in turn,



Still life with Pomp, Circumstance and Imposing Structures.

gain automatic combat bonuses, due to the raw fear their historical reputation inspires on the field of honor.

You can also effectively employ flanking maneuvers, artillery bombardments, engineers (the only way to actually destroy enemy installations), cavalry charges, and even economic warfare, by disrupting supply chains to front-line forces. In addition to the game's pure mechanics, *Cossacks II* offers some great little historical/dramatic touches: as selected units move and attack, a small, toggleable in-game window plays actual video clips of Napoleonic re-enactment groups marching about in full period regalia. During one multiplayer session demoed, some less-disciplined "loose" soldier units were seen idling behind a building, sitting down, and drinking on the job. And each of the various nations' structures—barracks, farms, academies, etc.—are architecturally distinct and lushly detailed. Between the buildings and unique combatants, *Cossacks II* will offer up some 180 distinct units.

There's also an overarching, strategic-level game with diplomatic/economic elements that let would-be conquerors carve up Europe (and a smidge of North Africa) as they see fit. While they haven't gone completely open book with all the features at this writing, they did note that, in addition to standard deathmatch battles, there will be a number of historically-sculpted multiplayer clashes echoing actual battles. Look forward to getting your Bonaparte on.

–Chris Hudak

The Suffering: Ties That Bind

Developer Surreal Software **Publisher** Midway
Release Date Fall 2005

The Buzz: When supernatural happenings busted Torque loose from death row, he had to fight monsters based on execution themes. Now that he's out of prison, he goes home to Baltimore and finds supernatural happenings busting loose all over. Only now, the monsters are based on themes of urban decay. There's a gun monster, a poverty monsters, a drug addiction monster, and a corrupt authority monster. "He's an officer who drags himself along, since he doesn't have any more legs," says Surreal Software's Richard Rouse III, showing a slide. "You can see he has a flashlight sort of jammed into his head." Inventory management has been streamlined (whew!), and your choices determine what kind of demon you morph into. But overall, it doesn't seem to vary too much from the first game. "It's has always been about being in a place where you want to get out of, whether it's a prison or East Baltimore," Rouse says.

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The new graphics engine can handle lots of units on-screen with few framerate problems

Raising Empires

Battling through the centuries, again, in **Empire Earth II** BY JOHN CALLAHAM

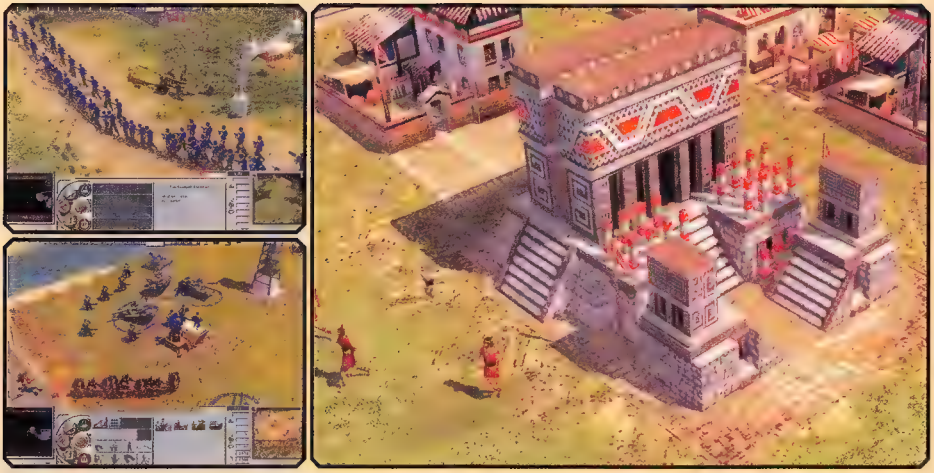
Developer Mad Doc Software **Publisher** Vivendi Universal Games **Release Date** April 2005

It's Like: *Empire Earth* on steroids

The Buzz: It's been nearly four years since the release of *Empire Earth*, the centuries-spanning real-time strategy game from Stainless Steel Studios. Fans of the first game will be happy that a full-fledged sequel will soon be heading to stores, this time with Mad Doc Software at the helm.

Much like in the first game, Mad Doc has thrown everything and the kitchen sink into the game in terms of sheer content. You get your pick of 15 different civilizations, and the developer boasts over 350 unique units, from primitive spearman to huge mech-like killing machines. You can choose to play from the start of civilization to the near future, but for some quicker single-player action you can use the skirmish mode that simulates a multiplayer battle. Alternatively, you can also choose to check out the three eight-mission mini-campaigns. The demonstration version used for this article featured the American campaign that starts at the Spanish-American War and ends at the Cyborg Cataclysm of 2070 (something to look forward to when we actually get to that time period in real life).

Empire Earth II has a number of new features including the division of the map into territories, much like in *Risk* or *Rise of Nations*. You have to move your forces into each territory, establishing structures, and hoping that your population explodes before your head does. Another feature is the citizen manager, which is Mad Doc's way of simplifying how you keep track of your



[clockwise from top] "Where are the tickets to Spamalot?"; They need an Extreme Makeover: Pyramid Edition here; Even in the future they will still have tanks, apparently.

helpful resource minions. There's a special map that highlights all the resources, and from this information you can use the citizen manager to select a resource, then sit back and watch your always-obedient servants head over to chop or mine what you want them to collect.

Battles can be quite huge affairs with dozens of units, both large and small, on the screen at the same time. Mad Doc is proud of its AI units in single-player, and it really showed as we played. Enemy units were not just charging into bases at every opportunity; they were also trying to outflank and outthink our moves. One of the most interesting things that comes into play during battle is the game's Crown system. This feature temporarily awards you with bonuses if you achieve dominance in one of several areas, such as military might, economics, or diplomacy. The sequel also has a Picture-in-Picture feature that allows you to check-out battles in another location, while still viewing your main window.

There are several graphical tweaks, including the addition of weather effects—rain, wind, snow, and more. Weather isn't just for show, either; it not only affects how you see the battlefield, but can also slow the movements of units.

The version used for this article was over two months away from the final product's release, so there were a few noticeable graphical bugs and some features like placeholder cutsscenes during the single-player scenarios. However, the sheer amount of stuff to play with was quite entertaining. While it's tough to pump new features into this genre, Mad Doc has certainly piled on the content, and hopefully the game's new features will make for easier management than in other RTS titles. ■

This Time, It's War!

Getting creamed in **Empire Earth II** multiplayer

It's one thing to play a multiplayer match against a regular Joe. It's quite another to face the folks who are actually making the game in a no-holds-barred online brawl. Such was the case when I was invited to fight against several members of Mad Doc's development team. Needless to say, they crushed me. Hard.

However, I am not a rock, and can learn from my failures. In this case, playing a losing battle allowed me to check out some of the multiplayer features that really stand out. One of them is the game's diplomacy system. Instead of employing the usual, "Can we be friends? Huh? Huh?" model, I was able to send Mad Doc CEO Ian Davis a message that actually outlined a set of conditions for our "peace treaty." The variety of options ranged from the amount of army support to the length of time our new treaty would be in effect. However, Davis rejected my plan and sent me his own proposal, which I accepted. It really does add a lot of strategy and even guile to a typical multiplayer game. "Is this new friendship really a good deal or can I get a better one from another player?"

The War Manager includes a 2D map of the level you're playing, and like a general in one of those WWII movies (or a football coach), you get to create lines and arrows that indicate your desired troop movement. As part of our alliance, General-of-the-Moment Davis transmitted his war map to me, which showed me where I should move my armies to help him defend his territory against an enemy attack. I almost expected to hear, "This… is CNN" in the background.

Finally, if you don't feel like building up an army completely from scratch, Mad Doc's new "quickmatch" multiplayer mode puts together a pre-determined number of units and structures so you can jump right into a scenario at later stages. All these perks made for an interesting experience... when I wasn't being pummeled by enemy tanks, that is.

My other car is a Predator drone. [inset] "Oh, you take the high road…"

Trackmania Sunrise

I Can't Drive 88.5

Developer Nadeo **Publisher** Enlight Software **Release Date** June 2005

It's like: Indestructible Hot Wheels Deluxe
The Buzz: If you're reading this in the United States, you might be confused about at least two things regarding *Trackmania Sunrise* from French developer Nadeo: 1) What the game is, exactly, and 2) Why its cars can't seem to hit each other. The original *Trackmania* was relatively obscure here, but a pretty large hit in Europe. It offered crazy, high-energy racing, a dizzying sense of speed, and the most nutzoid tracks imaginable: multistory half-pipes, straightaways designed for trans-Autobahn speeds, towering loops that would do a *Wipeout* game proud, and jumps better suited to Mecha-Knievel than the real one.

The game's success in Europe invited—demanded, actually—a follow-up; *Trackmania Sunrise* offers more of the same, plus visual and gameplay improvements aimed at a broader (read: American) audience. There is still no car-collision modeling, and therefore no chance of getting "helped" in a rail or off the track by another vehicle. The other cars might as well be ghosts in that regard—albeit gorgeous, substantial-looking ghosts, with flashy custom paint-jobs. At first, this may seem completely wrong to a combative gamer-brain like those possessed by *Carmageddon* fanatics, but *Trackmania Sunrise* makes up for it with raw beauty, speed, course creation, the occasional bout of virtual vertigo, and a truly innovative, puzzle-based gameplay mode.

While the controls are extremely simple, the challenge is in navigating the insane, looping, undulating, Seuss-esque tracks as quickly and efficiently as possible, all the while competing against the visible, but intangible, cars around you. It's true the other racers/players can't actually bump you out of the running, but you're more than capable of doing the job yourself, by mis-judging a hairpin turn (suspended twenty game-stories above the ground), underestimating some titanic loop-the-loop, or launching off a massive ramp at the wrong angle. The maneuvers are often spectacular—fly off some cyclopean half-pipe, do a sideways 50-story parabola through the air and make a clean landing on the other side—and the crashes are, at the very least, usually funny.

Long story short, the graphics are sharp and gorgeous. Don't take that on faith, check out the screenshots. Better still, if you see it, you can build it, and then some. The track editor will let players easily design their own courses—freely-shared, player-created tracks are a big online draw for the European *Trackmania* gamer-base—complete with in-game billboards displaying custom graphic files, if you want to get that into it. It's easy to imagine spending as much time creating tracks as playing on them.

Driving modes will include race, platform, and puzzle. Race, obviously, focuses on best time. Platform challenges you to complete the course with as few resets as possible. Puzzle is the deadly, look-up-and-it's-five-in-the-morning killer: You're given two points, Start and Finish… and it's up to you to design, and then race, the most efficient possible course between said points. Anything goes: if you can bridge a daunting physical distance with a single monster-ass jump—and then actually *make* said jump, effectively sleeping in the bed you just made—well then, bully for you. Or maybe you should lay down a safer series of surface straightaways and curves and just go for it.

Multiplayer supports network and online races, as well as a single-machine hotseat option that lets successive players take a crack at a time-attack mode.

If the no-contact stuff doesn't overly trouble you, this is racing at its gorgeous, addictive, mechanically simplistic best. So we'll see you on the racetrack—your track or ours? **–Chris Hudak**

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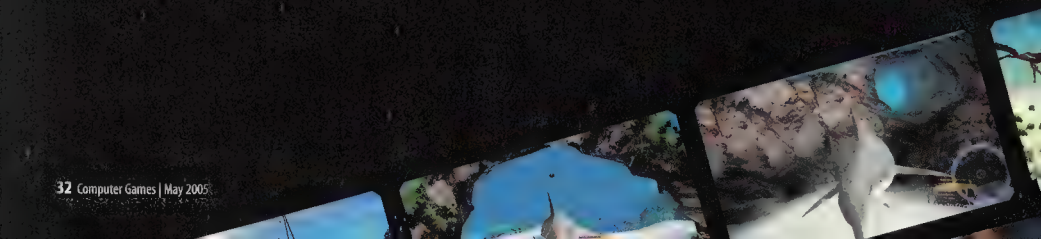
Lights, Camera, License

Publishers are looking to unlikely movie brands to help sell their games. What are these people thinking? It's all about the IP, baby. BY TOM CHICK

How many people who saw *The Warriors* in 1979 imagined that one day they'd be able to don Michael Beck's leather vest to cross New York City and tangle with that weird little guy clinking the beer bottles on his fingers? Probably not many. And even after Rockstar's announcement that they're making a game based on that movie, there probably still aren't many. In fact, many of you probably have no idea what that first line meant. The general reaction among gamers has been a sort of shrug.

Similarly puzzling are announcements from equally big-name publishers licensing unlikely movies (see sidebar). Was there a sudden demand for games based on old movies? Has the supply of comic book properties been exhausted? Or are publishers just looking for new ways to fight for the hearts, minds, and wallets of gamers?

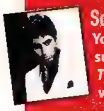


Taken

These are some of the movies already licensed for videogame adaptations

The Godfather

You begin as a small-time thug doing missions for the Corleone family to earn respect, which is the game's measure for how well you're doing. As you rise through the ranks of the underworld, you interact with characters from the film. EA says it's not a recreation of the movie, but a Godfather sandbox.



Scarface

You play as Tony Montana. It's from the makers of the successful *Simpsons: Hit & Run* game, which had a *Grand Theft Auto* style; you can probably lay odds that *Scarface* will have a similar gameplay model.

Reservoir Dogs

No comment from publisher 2K Games. The developer is SCi, best known for the *Carmageddon* games, with remarkable car dismemberment physics. The implications for ear physics are clear.

The Warriors

The developer is Rockstar North, the company that did *Manhunt*, where the grotesque gangs running amok in a vaguely post-apocalyptic urban setting were remarkable similar to the worlds of *The Warriors*. It's entirely possible that *Manhunt* itself was being developed as a licensed game, and it was either dropped or transferred to another project. Or it might be delayed as a tie-in with director Tony Scott's remake of the movie, which is in pre-production. Rockstar, however, refuses to comment.

Jaws

The developers of *Ecco the Dolphin*, Appaloosa, are using the same dynamics as that gentle game—you play a fish—but with a less benevolent bent. The game was originally developed as *Sole Predator*, in which you play a Great White Shark driven into a frenzy by sonic waves. In the course of your frenzy, you break things and eat people. Shortly after Appaloosa signed a publishing deal with Majesco, they acquired the *Jaws* license and rebranded the project.

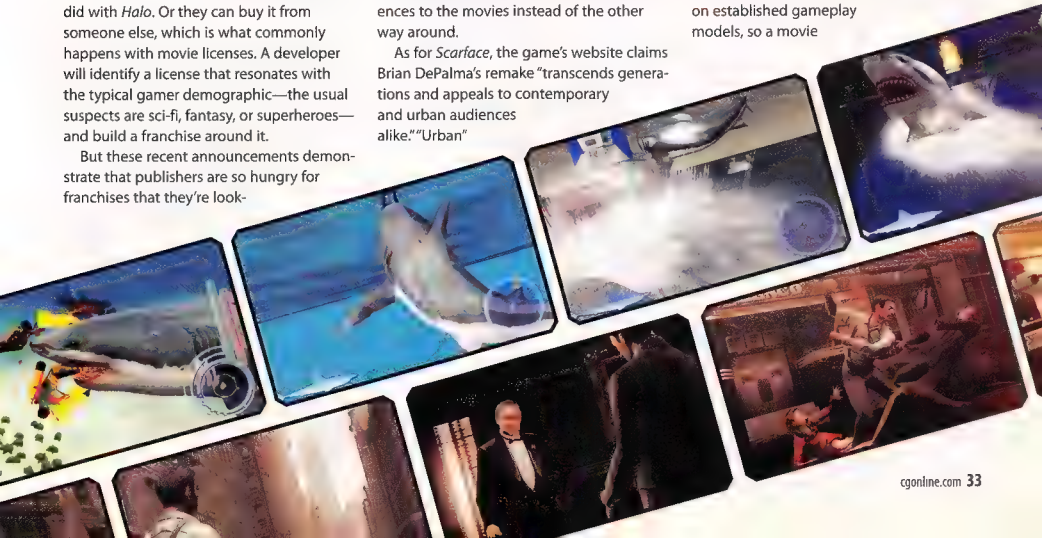
The fact of the matter is that you need a recognizable brand to sell big numbers. You won't find a title that isn't part of a franchise on the top-selling games for 2004. If a company is lucky, they can stumble onto a franchise, like EA did with *The Sims*. Or they can build it from the ground up, like Microsoft did with *Halo*. Or they can buy it from someone else, which is what commonly happens with movie licenses. A developer will identify a license that resonates with the typical gamer demographic—the usual suspects are sci-fi, fantasy, or superheroes—and build a franchise around it.

But these recent announcements demonstrate that publishers are so hungry for franchises that they're looking in non-traditional places. But will these unlikely licenses move games? Is a typical gamer going to buy *The Godfather*? Producer David DeMartini says the appeal of the movie goes beyond age groups. He calls it "American lore" and suggests that a *Godfather* game might even direct audiences to the movies instead of the other way around.

As for *Scarface*, the game's website claims Brian DePalma's remake "transcends generations and appeals to contemporary and urban audiences alike." "Urban" is a very particular word, and in this case is a reminder that the movie is enormously popular with certain demographics. "The entire Reggaeton audience is perfect for this game," says Nichol Bradford, the Senior Global Brand Manager for Vivendi Universal. "We're already getting love from Cubanos, Dominicanos, Puertorriqueños, Venezolanos, Nicaragüenses, Colombianos, Panameños, and Mexicanos who call *Scarface* their own. There's a tremendous cross-over between hip-hop and Hispanic audiences."

> **"We're getting love from Cubanos, Dominicanos, Puertorriqueños, Venezolanos, Nicaragüenses, Colombianos, Panameños, and Mexicanos who call *Scarface* their own."** –NICHOL BRADFORD

Some of these games are clearly based on established gameplay models, so a movie



Still Available

Not all movie licenses are taken: here's a few that would make brilliant videogames. Or not

Fitzcarraldo
A more modest version of a city builder, since you only have to build an opera house to win.

Bob & Carol & Ted & Alice
EA could license this for a *Sims 2* expansion pack.

Midnight Cowboy
See how many johns you can score before Ratso Rizzo dies of [illegible]

Butch Cassidy & The Sundance Kid
A co-op shooter with vehicles. Well, a bicycle, at any rate. The rights for "Raindrops Keep Falling on My Head" can't be too expensive.

Million Dollar Baby
Using the *Fight Night* boxing engine, you guide a woman boxer to the top. At the end, the DVD breaks in half, which will [illegible] you've seen the movie.

Deer Hunter
A tastelessly violent Russian roulette sim would sell, but unfortunately, the movie's name has already been taken. [illegible]

My Dinner with Andre
The Simpsons pre-empted any jokes about this one.

Deliverance
At last, a game that combines fancy water effects, hunting, and sodomy.

Straw Dogs
A combination first-person shooter/real-time strategy game that encourages turtling.

license is a way to set them apart. Everyone and his uncle is working on a *Grand Theft Auto*-style game, but with *The Godfather* license, EA's clone stands apart. And there are currently two shark games in development, so one with a *Jaws* license is going to get a leg up on the competition by getting more media coverage.

Celebrity likenesses can also play a part in these deals. DeMartini is clearly disappointed that EA couldn't get Al Pacino's voice or likeness (although he stressed that Michael Corleone will be a character in the game). (No one's saying whether Pacino's refusal to do *The Godfather* has anything to do with a Scarface deal pending announcement.) But consider that Vivendi's *Fight Club* was a huge disappointment. On the off chance that it failed not because it was a bad game, but because it lacked anything that resembled or sounded like Brad Pitt, much less Edward Norton, you can assume Vivendi has learned the importance of star power. "When gamers know and love a film, the way they know and love *Scarface*, looking, walking and expressing like Al Pacino is a big part of playing as Tony Montana," says Bradford. "They won't be disappointed," she adds.

When asked whether all these announcements bode ill for developers working on unbranded games, DeMartini says, "Where this leaves an original IP, well, it makes them focus that much more attention on gameplay and innovation. I look back at *SSX*. That game was hugely popular and we've sequeled it through three iterations." In other words, it's all about the IP. ■

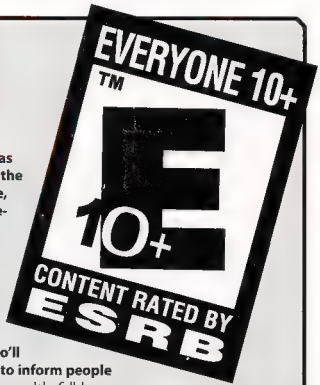
E Turned up to 10

New rating, more confusion

For the first time since its formation in 1994, the Entertainment Software Ratings Board has announced a new rating. This curiously named E10+, or "Everyone 10+," came about after the industry group consulted with child development experts and parents, says Patricia Vance, president of the ESRB. The new rating was needed to separate younger kids from those between the ages of 10 and 13, according to Vance.

The official description of the new rating describes it like this: "Titles rated E10+ (Everyone 10 and older) have content that may be suitable for ages 10 and older. Titles in this category may contain more cartoon, fantasy or mild violence, mild language, and/or minimal suggestive themes." This isn't to be confused with the "Teen" rating, which says a game is fine for 13-year olds. Games with the E10+ might have more intense gameplay, like a race game with crashes, or more suggestive language than those with an E.

Though it's hard to imagine a need for more ratings (can Teen-15 be far behind, and who'll stand up for the 12-year olds?), Vance believes the ESRB is doing a good job in its mission to inform people about the content of games. "78 percent of parents know about the ratings system," she says. –John Callaham



Greetings from...

Boston, Massachusetts

Why? Now that the Lombardi Trophy and the World Series crown reside in Boston, it's suddenly become the town people love to hate... unless, that is, you're a game developer. Massachusetts has the highest number of programmers per capita of any state, and no wonder: Egghead institutions like MIT, Harvard, and Boston College mean plenty of local talent to recruit, and plenty of well-funded researchers with whom to collaborate. Still, Ken Levine, the general manager/creative director for Boston-based Irrational Software [and CGM columnist], thinks it may be geography: "There's only one real city north of New York, and it's us."

History Lesson: The Boston area's game roots run deep, tracing back to now-defunct giants like Infocom (*Zork*), Papyrus (the *NASCAR* series), Impressions (*Pharaoh*), and the ill-fated Looking Glass, creators of the original *Thief* and *System Shock*. Nearly all of the houses currently operating in or near Boston are founded by or employ ex-employees of these four shops.

Notable Developers: Irrational Software, Blue Fang, Turbine, Stainless Steel Studios, Iron Lore, Mad Doc Software.

Signature Game(s): *Freedom Force* (Irrational), *Zoo Tycoon* (Blue Fang), *Asheron's Call* (Turbine), *Empire Earth* (Stainless Steel), *Empire Earth II* (Mad Doc).

Who knew? According to Levine, *Freedom Force* was very nearly a turn-based game.

The Big Myth: "People don't actually jump off the Tobin Bridge when the Red Sox lose," says Hank Howie, president of Blue Fang Software, located in nearby Waltham, Mass. Sure, now they don't.

True Fact: Good games = good lovin': Massachusetts has the lowest divorce rate in the United States.

QUOTABLES

"I love the videogames, and the news hates the videogames, so I hate the news. That's right, piss off news! The news is full of crazies who want me to be scared all the time... they blame everything on the videogames. And it's true, it's true, that there are plenty of videogames that tiny children shouldn't play. I'm a grown-up lady. I need to shoot s#!+. I think it's best it occur fictionally." –*Comedian Jackie Kashian, from her Comedy Central special*

"Then, in what will someday be recalled as perhaps the most shocking moment in the history of the games press, a rival magazine listed all of its editors' Top 5 of the Year picks—and not a single one of them included Half-Life 2 anywhere in their Top 5." *An apparently easily shocked Dan Morris, PC Gamer, "The Half-Nots"*

NEWSBYTES

Whoa, II–Shiny Entertainment and Atari announced *The Matrix: Path of Neo*, the second game from both parties based on the sci-fi film trilogy. You get to control Neo and relive key sequences from all three movies. That's a good thing, right?... **Monolith is Condemned**–Sega will publish Monolith's *Condemned*, a horror-thriller from the company that brought you *No One Lives Forever*. You control a fictional FBI agent, Ethan Thomas, who's a member of the bureau's Serial Crimes Unit. He tracks down and captures serial killers using instincts, forensic tools, and melee combat. The press release announcing Condemned promises "devious AI," along with a sophisticated combat system and realistic physics. Watch for it later this year.... **Boned**–Though Seattle Mariners fans will be disappointed it has nothing to do with Jay Buhner, developer Telltale Games announced plans to release a new PC game based on the comic book series *Bone*. It will be a "character-driven adventure," and its creators should know a little something about that—the team is made up of former LucasArts folks who helped create games like *Grim Fandango* and *Day of the Tentacle*.... **Military Game #379 Announced**–NovaLogic announced that it would remake the first game in its *Delta Force* series, using the *Black Hawk Down* game engine. Titled *Delta Force One: Next Gen*, it will include all of the maps found in the original game, plus brand-new single-player missions. It's due for release in spring....

Vampire Fallout

One of the top RPG developers closes its dungeon for the last time

Troika Games, the creators of *Arcanum*, *Temple of Elemental Evil*, and last year's *Vampire the Masquerade: Bloodlines*, has closed its doors. According to co-founder Leonard Boyarsky, the company was unable to land a contract after completing *Bloodlines*, which hasn't met sales expectations.

"When we finally admitted to ourselves we had to close it was a bit of a kick in the stomach, but I think the biggest blow was losing our team," he told *Computer Games Magazine*. Along with Jason Anderson and Tim Cain, Boyarsky helped form Troika in 1998. All three left Interplay, where they helped create the first two *Fallout* games.

Along with disappointing sales for some of their games, Boyarsky said that the conflict between running a business and developing games was part of their undoing. "To have a great team you need great leads, and we couldn't be great leads when we were busy running the business, managing finances, etc. We were in the process of looking for someone to run the business side of things when we closed."

At the time of its closure, Troika was working on a *Fallout*-style post-apocalptypic RPG, though Boyarsky said it was only at the tech demo stage. With the next *Fallout* in production, Boyarsky said that he'd be "very interested" in working with the team at Bethesda, but that there have been no formal discussions.

Despite the closure, Boyarsky remained optimistic. "[We're] trying to decide what we're going to do next and at the moment, none of us really has any idea what we want to do." He thanked Troika's loyal and passionate fans for "helping us through some dark periods."

"It's very gratifying and helped us through some of our dark periods. It's always nice to hear from people that they appreciate what you are doing. And we're extremely happy that there's a huge *Fallout* community, as that game, being the first that any of us were in charge of, was really a labor of love for us." **–Steve Bauman (with additional reporting by John Callaham)**

RANDOM IMAGE OF THE MONTH

UC Santa Cruz is perhaps best known for having a banana slug as its mascot. It probably excels in some academic field—stop with the letters, already; we know that people go there so they can smoke pot on the beach. Anyway, in celebration of Engineering Week, some enterprising students composed this ode to Mario with Post-it notes. A day later, those humorless economics majors took down their floor.

Make a Game, Go to Jail

Over the years, plenty of videogames have pushed the buttons of certain politicians. Some went after violent game content, but most attempts failed on First Amendment grounds. A new bill in the state of Washington, however, is approaching the issue from a different angle. Washington House Bill 2178—sponsored by Reps. Jim McCune (R), Joe McDermott (D) and Mary Lou Dickerson (D)—would give citizens the ability to take action against game publishers or retailers if someone under 17 commits a crime and it's determined that the game "was a factor in creating conditions that assisted or encouraged the person to cause injury or death to another person." In other words, any teenager that has played *Grand Theft Auto* and hits a pedestrian could, in theory, sue Take 2 or Wal-Mart.

The bill was first proposed on February 22, and at press time had passed through committee in a 6-1 vote. It still needs to go through the state House and Senate before being signed into law by the state's governor.

Rep McCune told *Computer Games Magazine* that games with violent content "... need to be out of our society." He doesn't feel they should have First Amendment protection.

The Entertainment Software Association has successfully fought previous bills that tried to restrict content, and thinks this one will fail as well. "It's an effort to get around what the courts have already said they couldn't do," said Gail Markels, the group's senior vice president and general consul. She thinks lawmakers are wrong when they try to make the case that PC and videogames have a bigger influence on people. "There is so basis for that assertion. Zero. None." –John Callaham

MASHED UP

With the chart-topping success of the Linkin Park/Jay Z "mash up" *Collision Course*, and the continued underground success of projects like Danger Mouse's *Grey Album* it's about time the game industry followed suit. Here are some suggestions:

No One's Doomed Forever 3

Cate Archer descends into the bowels of hell where, when faced with Satan's minions, she complains endlessly about the effect the heat has on her hair. But she does bring her own flashlight, one with a smashing fur trim.

American McGee Presents Sid Meier's Tom Clancy's Splinter Civilization: A Brian Reynolds Design

With so many gaming gods™ participating, this has to be brilliant, right? You're a rogue agent in a dark and twisted alternate history who uses ethical calculus, sneaking, your cool name, and an army of spearmen to disarm the nukes Gandhi is using to hold the world hostage.

Grand Theft Pikmin

Colorful vegetable-like things go bad—really bad—in this hyper-violent and sexualized version of the Nintendo classic. You don't want to know what they do to boost their health.

Medal of Duty: Men of Conflicted Honor—Offensive Enemy Assault

Spanning every major war of the 20th century, this game follows the exploits of Tommy Sandoval Jefferson through the jungles of Europe in WWII, the blown-out cities of Korea, the high-tech wasteland of Vietnam, and the lush forests of Iraq.

The Shock of Monkey Island

SHODAN takes on LeChuck and Guybrush Threepwood in a deserted spaceship in cyberspace. Imagine the sword fights:

LECHUCK: You're no match for my brains, you poor fool!
SHODAN: I (III)... I... I'd be in r-real troub(TROUB)blllle if you ever uuuuu(used)sed them, hacker (skreeeeeeeeeeCLICK).
LECHUCK: Yarrr!

Thanks to Justin Fletcher for Monkey Island. E-mail your own mash-ups to editor@cgonline.com

ION Storm Fizzles

Creator of Deus Ex no more

Eidos Interactive closed its Austin-based ION Storm offices in February. It was formed in Warren Spector in 1997 as a satellite branch of the now infamous Dallas-based Ion Storm, which was founded by John Romero and Tom Hall. While the Dallas studio crashed and burned in 2001, the Austin office produced both *Deus Ex* games and *Thief: Deadly Shadows*. But none of the games were strong sellers, and the shutdown seemed inevitable when Spector and other key members of the team left the studio in late 2004.

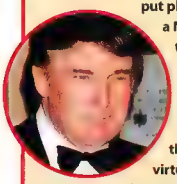
Eidos also announced plans to beef up its only remaining US internal game development studio Crystal Dynamics with more members, although it was unclear if any of the now displaced Ion Storm members will be offered jobs. And in other, unrelated Eidos news, various sources report that Rupert Murdoch is ready to buy the company to add to his News, Corp. empire. –John Callaham

NEWSBYTES

Paradox Gets Diplomatic–Developer Paradox Interactive will be the latest developer brining Avalon Hill's classic boardgame to the PC. As is usually the case, it will keep the classic board game features but will add some new ones to the mix. It's due in the second half of 2005.... Yahoo Xfires its Lawyers–Internet search and link powerhouse Yahoo! is suing the gaming instant messaging company Xfire, alleging that the latter company has infringed on a software patent for Yahoo!'s own message technology. The Yahoo! patent was co-credited to Chris Kimse, who left the company and later became vice president of engineering at Xfire..... Get Wet–Atari announced plans to publish *Rollercoaster Tycoon III: Soaked!*, the first expansion for the best selling amusement park sim. As the name implies, it will allow players to construct and run water parks full of flume rides, wave pools, and water slides. The expansion is being handled by *Rollercoaster Tycoon III* developer Frontier Developments—with guidance from the series' originator, Chris Sawyer—and is due for release in June.... Stalking S.T.A.L.K.E.R–THQ announced another delay in the release of *S.T.A.L.K.E.R: Shadow of Chernobyl*, the eternally-in-development first-person shooter from developer GSC GameWorld. It's now been pushed back to the second half of 2005 in order to give the development team more time to complete it, according to a statement by THQ. What a novel concept....

NEWSBYTES

Taste the Console Rainbow– Despite being a PC series, the next version of the *Rainbow Six* franchise will initially ship without a PC version. *Lockdown* will first appear for Xbox and PS2; however, on the plus side, representatives from UbiSoft say that the PC version will be an all-new game developed by Red Storm, not a port of the console versions.... Blames Games (after Canada)–Illinois, Georgia, and the District of Columbia are the latest fun places jumping up on the whole, "barring the sale of PC and videogames to minors" bandwagon. In other fun news, California legislator Leland Yee is again trying to pass a bill that would ban the sale of videogames with violent content for minors, despite the fact that a similar bill died in committee in 2004. A bill he proposed that required retailers to post signs detailing the ESRB ratings system was signed into law last year in California.... Age of Empires III is Board—Eagle Games announced it is working on a boardgame version of *Age of Empires III*. Eagle has previously published games based on *Age of Mythology* and *Sid Meier's Civilization*.... Digital Trump–Atari announced a new city simulation game titled *Tycoon City: New York*, where player will be able to make deals in the Big Apple and out-trump Donald Trump. Developed by Deep Red Games, it will put players in charge of a New York real-estate empire, though they'll obviously start small. You'll also be able to gauge the reaction of the virtual New Yorkers who populate your city by going down to street level and listening to how much they swear. Or something like that. It's due by the end of 2005....



Lip Sink

Spellweaver dispels the notion that RPG-ers should be seen, and not heard

Earlier this year, Mad Doc Software CEO Ian Davis traveled north to our offices, for seven hours, in a blizzard, to demonstrate his company's upcoming role-playing game *Spellweaver*. Davis believes that the game will be unique in so far as it utilizes a speech-recognition system in a way that hasn't really been tried before.

When you picture a game that invites you to cast spell by speaking, you probably visualize a LARP-ish activity where some geeky guy stands up, waves his arm, and shouts, "Lightning bolt, lighting bolt, lightning bolt!" really, really fast. A ridiculous image? Probably. But Davis is confident. "With most RPGs, it looks like they're doing very pretty versions of a spreadsheet," he says. "The idea behind this game is to be more immersive than any other role-playing game out there."

You are an apprentice wizard who has recently graduated from a Hogwart-esque academy. Before you can say, "lightning bolt, lightni…!" the conventional cataclysmic event occurs, striking down all wizards, and necessitating that you learn magic in trial-by-fire fashion. But how? What Richard Garriott did for runes in the *Ultima* series, Mad Doc is trying to do for phonemes. The game will use around 18 of these "power words," which, when combined and spoken, will cast spells or issue commands. You start with only a few, but eventually obtain more, in addition to the other *de rigueur* phat lewt. Game mechanics will reveal about 30% of the available spells, but the rest you'll need to discover on your own by trying out different combinations.

Davis believes that it's the instant access to spells that'll provide the immersion he's going for. "If you're just using three or four things, it's very easy to just use a hot key or a menu," he explains. "But speech gives you the ability to choose between hundreds of things just as quickly." So he demonstrates a prototype, stares earnestly at the screen as he's being attacked by a giant squid (or something), and says clearly, evenly, and fervently, things like "taat keysa ball." "Taat keysa foss." "taat taat." The 18 phonemes chosen were selected because of their commonality amongst many, many languages for the game's eventual localization.

Spellweaver will have a single-player and several multiplayer modes, including co-op, and a mode they're calling "magic duel mode." The latter gives your persistent character a chance to advance in ranking—a ladder system of some sort—and the victor of each duel can claim a power word of his opponent.

Perhaps the most interesting feature so far is the way they're handling interaction with the AI. Davis, a feisty (he uses the term "snarky") female named Robin, and another character demonstrate battle spells: "Tass rass Robin!" Tass rass being the "major heal" spell, and Robin being, well, Robin; and commands: "Robin, open chest," to which she answers, "Why is that my job?" Snarky indeed. If you don't say the NPC's name, the AI decides who you're speaking to based on who you were last talking to, who's near you, and who you're looking at, a technique which, if it works, should be pretty darned impressive.

Okay, some people will still feel silly sitting there shouting, "yim keysa seck!" (a sun ray spell), so for all its charms, the speech element will be optional. Davis thinks the naysayers will overcome their self-consciousness, though. "In the end," he says, "people talk to one another. That's what they do." **–Cindy Yans**

Spellweaver, powered by the Dungeon Siege II engine, will ship with a low-level voice recognition system, but Mad Doc is working on its own natural language processor.

THE MATRIX ONLINE

THE CONTINUING STORYLINE OF THE MATRIX GOES MASSIVELY MULTI-PLAYER. AN INTELLIGENT MISSION SYSTEM. REALISTIC AND INTENSE FIGHTING IN WIRE-FU AND BULLET TIME™ AND THE CHANCE TO ALTER MATRIX HISTORY FOREVER. STARRING: LAURENCE FISHBURNE, MONICA BELLUCCI, HAROLD PERRINEAU, NONA GAYE, LAMBERT WILSON, COLLIN CHOU, MARY ALICE, HARRY LENNIX, GINA TORRES AND TAMVEER ATWAL.

MUSIC BY: DON DAVIS. PRODUCED BY: MONOLITH PRODUCTIONS. DIRECTED BY: THE WACHOWSKI BROTHERS.

TEEN
T
Mild Language
Suggestive Themes
Violence
ESRB CONTENT RATING www.esrb.org

SEGA

ATI

www.thematrixonline.com

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History 101

Ensemble Studios continues to breathe life into history with its upcoming epic real-time strategy game Age of Empires III. If only school was always this interesting.

BY TOM CHICK

Greg Street, lead designer of *Age of Empires III*, is explaining some of the unique technologies for the different nationalities players will be able to control in the game. Many of them are trade-offs, with an advantage and a disadvantage. The Spanish, for instance, can earn coins from silver mines faster, but it lowers the workers' hit points. The tech is called Petosi silver mines. It represents how the extracted silver ore was processed with mercury, which was toxic to the workers. The British can improve their units' hit points, but it will lower their speed.

"What's that tech called?" I ask.

Street thinks for a moment. "I think that one is thin red line," he recalls.

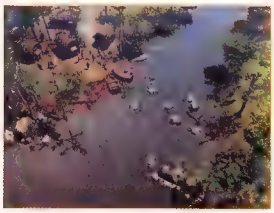
"Why? What's that mean?"

There's a pause. The guys around the table look at each other to see if anyone has the answer. It's quite an assembly: the game's lead designer, tech director, art producer, and a few others from the team. And none of them seems to know why a British tech is called "thin red line."

Then Ensemble's Bruce Shelley, who's been quietly watching, leans forward. "It comes from the battle of Balaklava in the Crimean War. A single British regiment had to defend a port they'd captured. They were up against a much larger force of Russian cavalry." He explains this in a tone situated comfortably between professorial and avuncular.

"They formed a line around the port, but it was so long they were only two men deep. The war correspondent William H. Russell was there that day. Looking down from higher ground, he described it as seeing a 'thin red line' between the Russians and the port they were attacking. But the British held their ground that day. And you know, just a few hours later was the Charge of the Light Brigade. It was quite a day." You get the feeling he could start reciting Tennyson.

And that's Bruce Shelley, the man who helped found a company devoted to breathing life—and gameplay—into history.



The water effects are amazing, and Ensemble is trying to make ships as large as possible.

Where the Heart Is

The central concept in this real-time strategy game isn't just winning a map. The idea is that you're an Old World country vying with your neighbors back in Europe to exploit the New World and bring its riches back home.

Every map begins with water areas fully explored, so you don't get any nasty surprises in terms of being closed up on an island or stuck behind a river. You land with an explorer, who is a sort of spellcaster unit with a sharpshooter ability for one-shot kills. It's set to autocast, but you can use it manually. He can eventually learn other abilities and become one of your more powerful units. You only get one, but if he dies, you can revive him by sending units to recover his body. Or, if he dies too deep in enemy territory, you can ransom his body by paying the other player some coin. In addition to your explorer, you get a handful of soldiers and villagers, and a covered wagon. When you find a suitable location, you deploy the wagon and it becomes your first town center.

So far, so good. It's typical *Age of Empires*, even the nomadic set up. But one of the main innovations is that every player has a home city. As you play, you earn experience points by fighting battles, finding treasures, building structures, trading, and allying with natives. Every time you get experience, a number flies up on the main screen, making it clear what you've done and how much experience it was worth. A green ring accumulates around your home city button, eventually filling up when you qualify for another shipment, which represents support from your country.

Pressing the home city button will then bring you to a full 3D representation of your bustling European capital. Here you can see what shipments are available: There are stockpiles of food, villagers, covered wagons for additional town centers, and military units. You choose what you want and can watch it marching down to the harbor. In a short time, it will arrive on the main map at your town center.

The full 3D version of your capital will be the "character" you level throughout the game.

Everything you don't choose will accumulate as it sits in your home city. So if you opt for the villager instead of the musketeer, the next time you get a shipment, your choices will include, say, three musketeers. Hold off long enough and a particular shipment can make a huge difference.

Also available are mercenaries—if you've unlocked the technology and if you have the coin to pay for them. At first, mercenaries are tiny groups hardly worth the price but, like everything else, the longer they sit in Europe, the larger they get. The trick is that all players are bidding for the same mercenaries. Once a group is bought, it's gone. Do you hold off and let those Swiss pikemen get more powerful, but risk losing them, or do you buy them now to keep your opponent from getting them?

I Have a Level 20 Paris

In addition to earning shipments, when your experience points reach certain thresholds, your city goes up a level, just like a character in an RPG. When this happens, you get one point to spend for technology and one for a visual customization. The home city screen has five buttons that will jump you to different locations in the city, each with its own skill tree, often varying by nationality. The trading company offers economic and naval advances; the military academy unlocks and improves soldiers; the cathedral gives you advanced buildings; the manufacturing plant unlocks the factory (an advanced building that will steadily create the resource of your choice) and later special abilities; and the harbor has a list of all your available visual customizations, like different colors for your buildings, fire breathers to entertain the people in the city, or decorative statues. These latter options give Ensemble a lot of opportunities to play around with the types of little animations you might have spotted in *Age of Mythology's* title screens.

The home city is designed to interrupt the gameplay as little as possible. When you toggle over, you still see the minimap, which you can click on to jump back into the game. Since you keep your upgraded home city as a persistent "character," you can wait to level it up and customize it between games.

Tech director David Pottinger likens it to a paper doll in an RPG. "We like *Diablo* a lot," he confesses.

Empires' Eight

Ensemble has announced six of the eight nationalities in *Age of Empires III*. Two are still a secret, but we know who they aren't.

British

Since the British were so keen on colonization, they get more villagers than the other nations. For every house a British player builds, he gets a free villager.

Dutch

The Dutch get fewer villagers than the other countries, but they're the only ones who can build banks to generate a steady coin income.

French

The French have an easier time allying with natives. They also get a courier, who's a tough and expensive villager, and a cuirassier, a super cavalry unit.

Germans

During much of this period there was no such thing as Germany, so here they serve as an amalgam of Prussians, Austrians, and others from the region. Their town center will occasionally produce a free uhlan, which is their unique cavalry unit, and a free super villager with his very own wagon. The Germans can also buy mercenaries without having to research the mercenary tech.

Portuguese

Being crackerjack explorers, the assumption is that the Portuguese tend to get there first. So they start every game with two covered wagons to turn into town centers. They have a spyglass ability, which periodically lets them see a portion of the map. Their skirmishers are Cacadore, representing Portugal's famous light infantry.

Spanish

The Spanish are the basic nationality who, by and large, play by the default rules. But since their country was historically more amenable to supporting exploration, the shipments from their home cities are cheaper.

Not Switzerland

Swiss pikemen are one of the mercenary units, "but you can't play as the Swiss," said Greg Street.

Not America

Although *Rise of Nations* eventually included the Americans, dating all the way back to ancient history, at one point Bruce Shelley casually mentioned, "We don't have the Americans in this game." He went on to explain that they did have the Native Americans in the game because focus testers invariably said, "Indians are cool. Give us the Indians."

Maps of the New World

Ensemble says *Age III* will have more types of random maps than its previous games. The maps are round this time, with no corners to hide in. We saw artwork for swamp and desert areas as well as some of the following map types:

Amazon
A jungle map with a wide, brown, muddy river.

Caribbean
This is probably an island map, one which shows off Ensemble's fancy water effects

Carolina
Lush and green coastal areas.

The Great Lakes
A big fat lake, smack dab in the middle, ringed by land; it's similar to the Mediterranean maps in the other *Age* games, but has a trade route running a circular path around the lake.

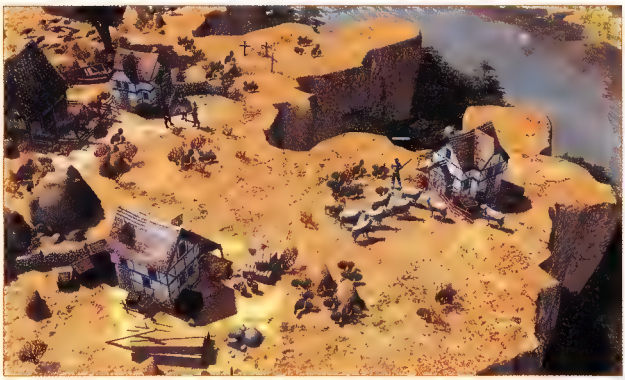
The Great Plains
Lots of food and lots of Native American camps.

New England
Cliffs along the coast.

Sageunay
A coastal map with one team inland and one team on the ocean.

Texas
Texas always has two trade routes.

Yukon
Snowy terrain with a slightly blue light and lots of gold mines.



In these particular times, sheep were very important. For their wool and such.

How Much for that Long Island?

Meanwhile, back in the Old World, the game unfolds like a fairly typical RTS, with some important exceptions that will discourage turtling. As you explore, you'll find fixed roads that stretch from one end of the map to another. These are trade routes. A Native American trader constantly runs from one end to the other, wrapping around and appearing again at the far end. Along the way, there are "sockets" where a player can build trade outposts. The trader will stop at these outposts and award their owner a handful of experience points.

One of the technologies you can research lets you switch this experience point award to resources (*Age III's* resources include food, wood, and coin; the latter is distinct from gold since there are separate gold and silver mines on some maps). From your trade outpost, you can upgrade the itinerant native trader to a stagecoach and then to a train, each of which improves your income but also makes the trade "sockets" more valuable and therefore a more tempting target for your opponents.

You'll also find Native American camps as you explore the map, each representing a specific tribe. If you build a trade outpost at the camp, you'll ally with that tribe. Then your outpost will be able to recruit special units, depending on the tribe. There are Aztec jaguar warriors with obsidian swords, Nootka whale hunters with bladed paddles, Cherokees with rifles from their early contact with Europeans, Sioux riders, Iroquois tomahawks, and Cree trackers. These units are powerful and expensive, but they don't require the population support you need for your European soldiers (in *Age III*, like the previous games, you build houses to increase your population capacity).

One of the victory conditions is to either build four outposts on a trade route, or four outposts next to Indian villages. Either of these will start a victory timer, similar to the way you could win a wonder victory in previous *Age* games.

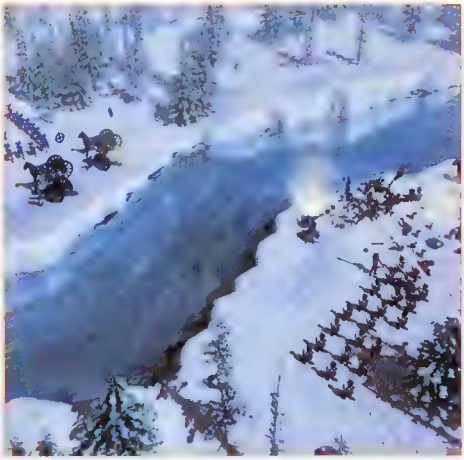
Keep it Together

Also new in *Age of Empires III* is a combat model that seems partly inspired by Timegate's *Kohan* series and Big Huge Games' *Rise of Nations*. The guys at Ensemble use the term "swirling mass of crap" on more than one occasion when they describe how a typical battle goes in an RTS.

"It's when all your orderly formations come together and mix up and start dying and there's no telling what's going on and then it's over and somebody has won," says Street. "It's kind of like a rugby scrum."

But Ensemble has just finished putting in their new combat model, which stresses letting the AI manage the tactical details based on the formation you choose. You can choose it manually, although there's a default mode if you don't want to mess with it.

"You can just put the units together and they'll do the smartest thing for their army," Street says. If you have idle military units standing around, they'll even incorporate themselves into nearby formations. You can "lock" units so they won't do this, which will also allows you to



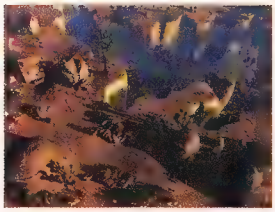
The new combat system lets the AI manage the tactical details based on the formation you choose. As shown here, battles look much more orderly.

manage them more closely. But the overall idea is that you control your armies in blocks, not swarms.

Formations are visually reflected not just by animation but also by the shape of the block. In volley formation, they line up and conduct ranged fire, the first row kneeling in front of the second row, all very orderly. In charge formation, they group in a shallow wedge and run into melee combat. In bombard formation, which is automatic when you include more powerful artillery units, they form a square around the artillery; what's more, any damage the formation receives is distributed among all the units.

There are additional formations that are more concessions to gameplay than history. For instance, in cover formation, units arrange themselves in a circle and move more slowly, but they take reduced damage from artillery. In defend formation, they can't move at all and they can only conduct melee attacks, but they have quadruple hit points.

"It's the 'Holy crap, I'm getting my ass kicked, hold on guys, I'll have some reinforcements over there in a sec' mode," says Pottinger. "You'd also use this to hold a mountain pass or guard a trading post," Street adds.



The new maps allow for plenty of terrain variance.

Ship Shape

Ensemble's new idea for naval combat in *Age III* is actually their old idea.

"We liked the naval model we had in the first *Age of Empires*, where you could really control the map with a navy," Street says. "But that went by the wayside in the later games. You could just build far enough inland and nothing could touch you. But this time, if you get to the last age, these bombard ships come in and you won't be safe anywhere. If someone says, 'I'm going to build a lot of cavalry,' we want you to be able to say, 'Well, I'm going to build a navy.'"

You start out with a caravel, which is a ship like the Mayflower. Then you can upgrade to a galleon, which is a larger transport that can serve as a sort of secondary base since it can build land units. Then you can go up to a frigate, which is your first serious warship. Finally, there's the bombard ship. And the idea this time is that a substantial navy would consist of five or six ships, not twenty or thirty.

"We're trying to keep ships very large," Street says. "In our other games, we'd put out screenshots with really big ships, but by the time the game came out, we'd shrunk them down quite a bit. But now people have seen *Master and Commander* and *Pirates of the Caribbean*. They have a much better sense for these big majestic ships. So this time we really want gigantic ships that are like floating castles."

Hat Trick

While Street is breaking down the basic units every country gets, he describes how some of the hussars "have those, you know, big band hats." He puts both hands over his head and shoots them up in parallel directions to illustrate, you know, a big band hat.

"Shako," Bruce Shelley says. "Or a kepi." Shelley explains how they could be used to store food during foraging expeditions, and how they were designed to be intimidating in battle by making a man look taller. Shelley's not being pedantic. It's just that he knows, and he cares enough that it's interesting to him.

And believe it or not, we're fascinated, having been turned into history geeks partly by Shelley's games. This is, after all, the man who taught a generation the meaning of the word "trebuchet." So, years from now, when you casually mention a shako or a kepi, you'll know who to thank. ■

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The Empire Kinda Strikes Back

And through the force, dialogue trees you will see in **Knights of the Old Republic II: The Sith Lords**

BY KELLY WAND

★ ★ ★ ½

Genre Sequel to Stupid-Huge Successful Star Wars RPG **Developer** Obsidian Entertainment **Publisher** Lucasarts **ESRB** Teen **Requirements** 1GHz CPU; 256MB RAM

Knights of the Old Republic II: The Sith Lords wants desperately to be, and by all rights should have been, the *Empire Strikes Back* of the *KOTOR* franchise. But Obsidian Entertainment, treading delicately in the huge footprints left by BioWare's 2003's Game of the Year original, seems to have been left hanging by LucasArts to accommodate an impossible (and fiscally pointless) *Godfather III* timetable. The strain shows sporadically throughout the sequel's 60-plus hours' worth of gameplay, before culminating in an embarrassingly perfunctory wrap-up from which the series will now be officially at pains to recover.

Seriously, why the rush? By diligently/stupidly lining up months in advance to see movies that take three years apiece to produce (with the longest gestation period of all yielding *The Phantom Menace*), *Star Wars* fans have time and again demonstrated the patience and tolerance of, uh, Luke on Dagobah. RPGs are the most complex games to develop, and among the most harshly judged, because their wordiness holds special appeal for the literate, i.e., the sportily finicky. On top of all this, *Knights of the Old Republic* was critically acclaimed and commercially popular, which would seem to merit extra care and devotion.

Unfortunately, however, games tied to movie licenses come out when they're due, not when they're done. Epic alternate endgame sequences designed to knock your dick in the dirt, and/or tie at least some of the intricate plot strands remotely together, were lopped off like a Skywalker hand at the last minute. Other annoyances range from numerous crash bugs and showstopper instabilities to influence-farming exploits, dialogue tree cul-de-sacs, and

[from left] Bao-Dur is "arm"-ed and dangerous. Huh; Die, robot; Plot twist: story device whereby a character who acts evil all game turns out to be… evil.

an overall unfinished look to the environments. The designers pray you'll ignore all this and simply bask in their devout adherence to BioWare's winning formula and, following a slow ramp-up, they make it pretty hard not to do just that.

Sith Lords may be Obsidian's fledgling effort, but the company is populated by RPG vets who cut their teeth on legendary anti-hero hoe-downs like *Planescape* and *Baldur's Gate*, and their experience and casual sureness of hand shows constantly here in the dialogue's subtle turns of phrase, the story beats, and the necessarily elastic narrative rigging. Between having all hands in the universe seemingly raised against you and being in charge of party members who can't stand each other and can't be trusted, it makes for a wonderfully dark, doomed atmosphere, with paranoia sitting in for nitrogen. RPGs live or die by their writing, and *Sith Lords* features tons of bizarre tangential pearls, from brazen sexual come-ons to debates over what lightsaber colors reveal about the user's personality. You encounter an evil Wookiee, control self-serving protocol droids, and divulge your character's own backstory bit by bit, if you feel like it.

Much of *Sith Lords* will probably seem incoherent to those who didn't finish the first *KOTOR*. Although you play a different individual this time around, the events depicted in the original figure so prominently in the sequel's storyline that newcomers will doubtlessly fail to appreciate the cameos, plot ripples, and references to this battle and that. In fact, even *Star Wars* fanatics may have trouble keeping the relationships between equally nebulous and sinister shadow factions like the Mandalorians and the Sith straight. But since all of them seem to want you dead, it hardly matters. Fortunately, you tend to be more occupied picking your next feat or opening up a new skill tree than contemplating the sonorous radio static of the *Star Wars* political landscape buzzing slowly in the background.

Few elements in the game live up to the writing. The quests are straightforward exercises in backtracking, and the patented pause-to-give-orders BioWare combat system—with the constant acquisition of tools, guns, mines, and upgrades by opening crates and searching bodies—artfully captures that childhood *Star Wars* feeling of opening crates and searching bodies. Each new planetary area is linear, boxy, and monochromatic; you always seem to be trying to find your way out of some tunnel to get back up to the featureless surface. Vehicles that you can't operate seem parked everywhere. Characters you can't attack talk smack. Occasionally you wander into mobs of decidedly unchallenging AI, their faces usually obscured by annoyingly huge, blocky combat icons. That the combat serves as downtime between choice nuggets of dialogue sounds like anything but *Star Wars*, but *c'est la vie*.

> **"Unfortunately, however, games tied to movie licenses come out when they're due, not when they're done."**

Not that anyone could accuse *Sith Lords* of being light in the content department. In addition to literally hundreds of upgradable, authentic weapon types, including a newly constructed lightsaber of your handpicked specifications, this time your character ac-

[top] Swoop race barriers are even more metallic in the sequel. [bottom] I'd like to hand her maiden.

quires Light or Dark side Force powers from the get-go, and beefing up to one of the three Jedi prestige classes is easier than before. With a nod to *Jedi Knight*, different lightsaber fighting styles are now available, though most battles are so easy even on the hardest difficulty that mere 'sabre possession is often enough. However, some styles make all the difference when going up against the formidable Sith Lord bosses.

Still, the backbone of *KOTOR 2* remains the ramifications of your moral decisions, rigidly measured by your Light/Dark side compass needle, and none of this is determined by combat per se, but through how your character chooses to express him- or herself verbally. Your dialogue choices not only affect which Force powers can be accessed and which story path is taken, but how the members of your belligerent little party treat each other and think of you; your fluctuations from Light to Dark and back again affect their speech and behavior as well.

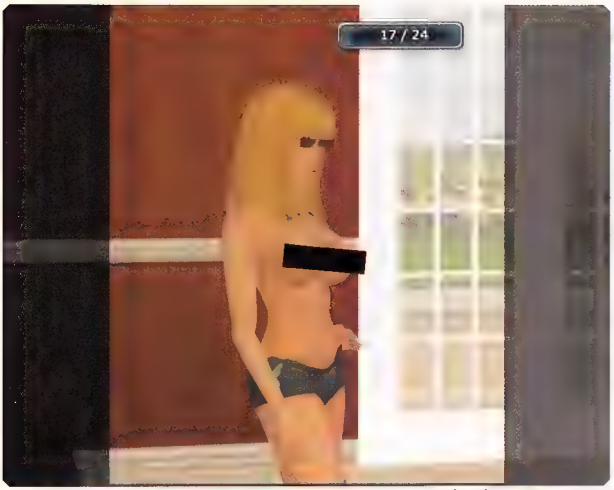
And though this is endemic to *Sith Lords*, it's also where the reality sort of breaks down. It's one thing to side with an evil corporation by killing their enemies, but sometimes just being verbally snotty to your companions is enough to tip your Light/Dark meter. Han Solo constantly berated Luke and Obi-Wan without frying the ball-hairs off a single midichlorian; shouldn't actions count for more than words?

Though controlling multiple characters with complementary abilities is hardwired into *KOTOR*'s basic design, it's definitely less immersive—unwieldy even—toggling among them so often just to short out a force field or pick a canister lock, especially toward the end. Finally, having to manually level-up reappearing side characters one level at a time four or five times in a row stops the action cold, and having the default powers and skills and feats never vary from character to character regardless of their class seems like pretty liberal use of the word "Recommended" on the tab so labeled.

Sith Lords may be a victim of its predecessor's success. The original *KOTOR* was not only a hit because so few Xbox owners were familiar with BioWare's tried-and-true *modus operandi*, although that certainly helped. But it also served as a thorough, often exuberant riff on the first movie trilogy, one that left no stone unturned. It ran wild with passion and wit that the new movies can only dream of, and the hairpin curves of its plot kept firing at you like AT-AT turrets all the way to an appropriately ambitious, chilling finale.

Despite moments of greatness, *Sith Lords* is ultimately less startling. You feel like you've played it before, and you have. Doubtless, there will still be a *KOTOR 3*, and with any luck it will be given a fairer chance at posterity. Giving in to the Dark Side may be faster, but it doesn't make for better RPGs. ■

UPSIDE Superior story and dialogue; that whole Star Wars ambience thing
DOWNSIDE Rest of the game can't live up to the writing; it was launched a wee-bit too soon; crash bugs



It's a photo shoot; how not very exciting.

Playboy: The Mansion

Everyone loves Hef

★ ½

Genre Peep Show **Developer** Cyberlore Studios
Publisher Arush/Hip Games **ESRB** Mature
Requirements 800MHz CPU; 256MB RAM

Who wouldn't want to be Hef? You get to wear pajamas 24-7 and live a life of ludicrous luxury surrounded by gorgeous silicon-enhanced women. But if you believe *Playboy: the Mansion*, the life of Hugh M. Hefner is one of long stretches of boredom punctuated by parties and boobs. Which isn't entirely unlike most people's lives.

You take control of Hef and move him around the mansion, *Sims*-like, while managing the empire. Your main goal is to publish a monthly issue. You hire/fire journalists and photographers, and line-up interviews and photo shoots with celebrities. You also spend a lot of time talking to people, with a *Sims*-like interface and gibberish language.

Publishing an issue is very abstracted. You need six components: a cover shot, a centerfold, a pictorial, an article, an essay, and an interview. While that makes some sense, the quality of each item is determined almost entirely by how much everyone likes Hef. You socialize with people at parties, or during the day in the mansion, but the interactions aren't particularly interesting. It's very binary—you have a handful of conversation options, and if you repeat them enough, you become friends with the person. Once that's accomplished, they can run off and produce better articles or pictorials.

With women, they can be your girlfriend, which then allows them to be a sort of proxy Hef, wandering around the mansion boosting everyone's feelings toward the man. You can also have random sex with them, which is more in keeping with that whole swinging *Playboy* vibe. (Nevermind the sexual harassment issues of sleeping with employees.)

People tend to spontaneously make out in the Mansion, which isn't entirely unlike the offices of most businesses.

TOP SELLERS

1 World of WarCraft
Vivendi Universal ★★★★★
And round three is the "back on sale" **World of WarCraft**. Someone at Vivendi Universal is very happy right now.

2 **Half-Life 2**
Vivendi Universal ★★★★★

3 **The Sims 2**
Electronic Arts ★★★★★

4 **The Battle for Middle-Earth**
Electronic Arts ★★★

5 **The Sims Deluxe**
Electronic Arts ★★★★½

6 **RollerCoaster Tycoon 3**
Atari ★★★★½

7 **Lemony Snicket**
Activision ★★½

8 **Call of Duty**
Activision ★★★★½

9 **Sponge Bob Square Pants**
THQ Not Rated

10 **Zoo Tycoon 2**
Microsoft ★★★

11 **Halo**
Microsoft ★★★★

12 **Rome: Total War**
Activision ★★★★★

13 **Sea World Tycoon**
Activision Not Rated

14 **Need for Speed Hot Pursuit 2**
Electronic Arts ★★★½

15 **Hot Wheels World Race**
THQ Not Rated

16 **RollerCoaster Tycoon 2**
Atari ★★★★

17 **Sid Meier's Pirates!**
Atari ★★★★★

18 **Call of Duty: United Offensive**
Activision ★★★★★

19 **DOOM 3**
Activision ★★★½

20 **Flight Simulator 2004**
Microsoft ★★★★★

Source: NPD Group/NPD Funworld. The January list is based on units sold by more than 70 channel partners, representing 90% of the U.S. retail consumer market.

[above] There are limited interactions available, making this part of the game pretty dull. [left] Now there's a cover shot… or not.

The photo shoots are interesting, if only because composition and poses are irrelevant; the quality of the photos is primarily determined by the relationship between Hef and the model or photographer. You can even have an object obscure the model, place the image on the cover, and still sell millions of issues solely because everyone likes Hef.

In fact, the entire game plays out as one giant mash note to Hugh Hefner. This is fine and dandy—it's his *Playboy*, after all, and he is without question one of the most fascinating and influential public figures of the last 100 years—but it makes for one weird game. He's portrayed as a youthful, sporty guy that hangs out with hip-hop stars and rockers all day and parties all night, but the game is set in the modern-day world of *Playboy*, where he's really an amazingly youthful senior… who hangs out with hip-hop stars and rockers and presumably still parties all day and night.

Playboy: The Mansion features plenty of polygonal breasts, but is relatively chaste. Maybe it's splitting (pubic) hairs, but modern *Playboy* has full-frontal nudity; presumably, the ratings system wouldn't allow it, so why not set the game in the '50s or '60s, when all *Playboy* could show was boobies? It would also explain why Hef was so young, and would provide a groovier backdrop. Doesn't everyone think that '60s *Playboy* was hipper than today's model? You can unlock old issues and covers from the past within the game, and it's hard not to notice the change from the natural women of the '50s, '60s, and '70s, to the plastic and manufactured ones of the '80s and '90s; the centerfolds today arguably look like videogame characters, with their perfectly textured skin and impossible body shapes.

The gameplay of *Playboy: The Mansion* is ultimately its biggest problem. Frequent random crashes make it a "save often" kind of game. Since the social aspects are tedious, nothing is worse than having the game crash post-party before you saved. (A patch addressed the most obvious one that occurred each time you clicked on one of the menu screens if you run the game at a resolution higher than 1024×768, but clicking on a menu still creates a general sense of fear.) And with so few options, it's as shallow as the Penthouse Pet. There's an interesting strategy/management game to be made from running something as complex and interesting as the *Playboy* empire, but this isn't it. **–Steve Bauman**

NASCAR SimRacing

Riding With the (New) King

★★★★

Genre Left Turn Racing **Developer** Tiburon
Publisher EA Sports **ESRB** Everyone
Requirements 1GHz CPU; 256MB RAM

Is anyone missing Papyrus? The defunct developer may have deserved a crown as the king of racing-game design, but its incredibly rigorous simulations won it almost as many detractors as fans. Pulling some laps on a real-life oval was practically a prerequisite to enjoying the extraordinarily challenging likes of *Grand Prix Legends* and the *NASCAR Racing* series.

But the question is moot now, anyway. Papyrus is as dead as Dillinger and EA Sports has locked up exclusive rights to NASCAR until 2009. That's not a bad thing, however, if *NASCAR SimRacing* is a good example of what the sports-game giant plans to do with the license. Unlike its *NASCAR Thunder* predecessors, this is a serious sim, albeit one that handles racing in a friendly, approachable way.

What separates *NASCAR SimRacing* from Papyrus games of yore is its philosophy regarding realism. Where Papyrus always stuck you behind the wheel of a 700-horsepower behemoth, Tiburon assumes that you're a pro driver competing against other pro drivers and adjusts the physics accordingly. So while it always feels like you're driving a car, the physics haven't been so thoroughly modelled that your ride always turns into a 3,400-pound top as a result of too-tight drafting, pulling in too sharply after a pass, or bumping to the front of the pack.

Gearheads will undoubtedly bitch that this makes the game too easy and unrealistic. And, indeed, the driving aids that start up by default make the game a cakewalk, at least until you switch them off. But from this corner of the pit, the difference in design philosophy actually makes races more authentic, as you don't have to drive up a tremendous learning curve just to finish a race. You're supposed to be a pro, remember?

And this design certainly makes the game more playable. Being able to pull off

[above] Panning down the line of cars set to start another Daytona 500 will bring goosebumps to any NASCAR fan. [left] The claustrophobic cockpit view ramps up the tension even during the pace lap.

aggressive passing moves without winding up a bloody smear on the wall because of hyper-real physics is a definite plus.

Dialing back the kamikaze enemy-driver A.I. common to Papyrus sims also helps. In *NASCAR SimRacing*, your rivals are concerned as much with saving their skins as they are with winning races. In practice, this means that opponents back off and accommodate aggressive moves if it allows them to avoid collisions. Finding the comfort zone between asserting yourself and committing vehicular suicide—just as real pros like Jeff Gordon and Bobby Labonte do most Sundays on FOX—is the key to competing here.

But although EA Sports has tailored *NASCAR SimRacing* for sim-happy PC gamers, it sometimes seems like one of the company's console ports. The manual is a pathetic pamphlet. Career mode is hard to enjoy because you can't save races in progress, and some aspects aren't fleshed out. Mechanical research is too streamlined, in that you simply throw money at power, brakes, or whatever and wait until an upgrade becomes available. Earning sponsors who tart your car up with garish logos is a great idea, but the reward system is screwed up. Offers vary so wildly that companies like Food City and Georgia Power don't seem to care if you've just kicked ass at Talladega or turned the Bristol Motor Speedway into a demolition derby.

Online play seems something of an afterthought. Up to 43 players can take part in races, but pushing the numbers anywhere above a dozen appears to introduce serious lag. Also, you need to turn the graphical settings way down to get a playable framerate, regardless of the number of opponents.

There is at least a lot of content here, though, including the entire lineup of drivers taking part in the 2005 season, 25 bona fide NASCAR ovals plus three fantasy tracks, and the entire NASCAR lineup, including the Craftsman Truck and National series, and of course the Nextel Cup.

Presentation is second only to a TV broadcast. Tiburon has put together some gorgeous virtual racetracks and grounds, with loads of details like full pit-crew animations, realistic car damage that includes wall scrapes and hood-dislocating crashes, and burning-car smoke so oily that you'll want to run to your kitchen and grab the fire extinguisher. Shadows even move and stretch depending on the time of day as each race progresses, adding to the marathon atmosphere of NASCAR events.

Those still mourning the passing of Papyrus might have a dissenting opinion, but it's hard to see *NASCAR SimRacing* as anything but an excellent simulation of life on the stock-car circuit. **–Brett Todd**

Second Sight

Prediction: everyone will hate the save system

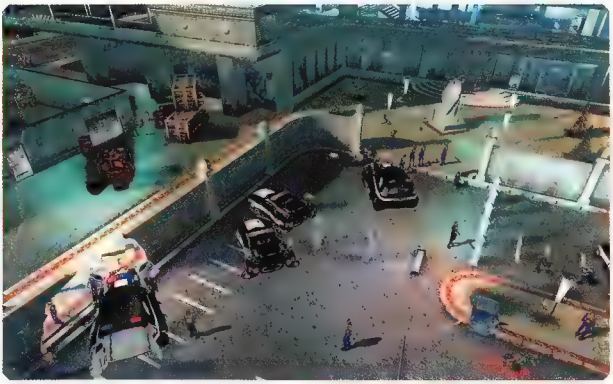
★ ★ ★ ½

Genre Psychic Stealth Action Shooter **Developer** Free Radical **Publisher** Codemasters **ESRB** Teen **Requirements** 1GHz CPU; 256 MB RAM

The box art for *Second Sight* consists of a man bent over in apparent distress, his head cradled in both hands. It's a good visual description of your own mood when dealing with the game's pointlessly stingy save system. That's right, it's one of those save-only-between-levels deals. Maybe there's a case to be made that it increases tension. But the developers don't even follow through on that philosophy, since each of the seventeen missions features several "soft" checkpoint saves that aren't retained if you quit. Since the publisher's name implies that they're masters of coding, the save system probably isn't the result of technical incompetence, and can most likely be chalked up to a more general form of dumbness. The result is a game that forces you to play it in uninterrupted forty-five minute chunks.

Which is too bad, because *Second Sight* is a pretty nifty action shooter with an unobtrusive stealth element, a cool array of psychic powers, and a surprisingly engaging story. It does a terrific job of plopping you down into various situations, and then letting you deal with them either through guile or brute force. Between the variety of traditional weapons available, the ability to sneak around and kill silently, and the various options offered by your five psychic powers, there's a lot of opportunity for tactical improvisation. The powers include a really gratifying, body-flinging implementation of telekinesis (complemented by a decent physics system) and the handy ability to temporarily possess enemies.

At under 10 hours of play—and with no multiplayer—it's a short but often intense ride, one which builds to a satisfyingly trippy conclusion. The first time you pick a guy up with your mind and then fling him into a fence, permanently wedging his head between a couple of support posts, you may even forgive the designers for their stupid, stupid save system. Actually, you probably won't. **–Erik Wolpaw**



The future is dark and ugly, but the cops in 2170 are ready: Whatcha gonna do when they come for you?

Cops: 2170

Just the bad and the ugly . . . good got the week off

★ ½

Genre Turn-based Cyberjunk **Developer** Mist Land **Publisher** Strategy First **ESRB** Teen **Requirements** 800 MHz CPU; 128MB RAM

The turn-based strategy genre just doesn't turn out the classics like it used to. Sure, every once in a while a glimmer of hope comes along, like last year's *Silent Storm*. But let's face it, *X-COM* and *Jagged Alliance* came out a long time ago. Turn-based strategy fans are the new adventure gamers, a desperate lot willing to jump at even the smallest whiff of past glory only to face disappointment much more often than not. And *Cops: 2170* is no exception, a perfect example of a game only a truly masochistic turn-based fanatic could play for any significant amount of time.

It wants to be really gritty and cyberpunky. It wants it really, really bad. It has a filthy, pseudo-retro look, and incorporates just about every stereotype of the dark, deconstructed future it tries so desperately to portray. It wants to give you the cool cyberpunk dude with the black trench coat, bleeding-edge cyber enhancements, and enough firepower to make Rambo look like a girl scout.

But it just isn't there. What you get instead is more like the kid who buys the preripped jeans at the mall and thinks it makes him tough. Nobody's buying it. Pile on top

The unusual but effective inset sniper scopeof Second Sight.

of that some of the worst writing of all time brutally partnered with voice acting akin to nails on the blackboard and you have a game that's very difficult to stomach.

But as unpleasant as all that is, it could almost be forgiven if the gameplay came through with something that kicked a little ass. Surprise! It does… not. The pacing is tedious, the AI simplistic, and the combat unsatisfying. Even worse is running around after everyone's already dead trying to figure out who to talk to or what to do to even get to the next mission. The whole game is just one long train wreck, and not a cool cyberpunky one either. **–Adam Fleet**

Aerial Strike

Blowing stuff up for pennies on the dollar

★ ★ ★

Genre Flight Sim Impersonator **Developer** Yager Development **Publisher** Dreamcatcher **ESRB** Teen **Requirements** 1GHz CPU; 256MB RAM

There's a definite line between a bargain and just getting some cheap crap. For something to truly be the former, there is a necessity for some real value, whereas cheap just means it didn't cost very much. Most so-called budget games fall into the latter category. They're priced to trap poor, unsuspecting shlubs who think they might be getting a deal on a decent game, only to be unpleasant surprised by the barely playable drek lurking within the box. But every once in a while there's a budget game like *Aerial Strike* that comes through on what a budget game should be: unassuming, inexpensive, and thoroughly disposable… but mostly entertaining.

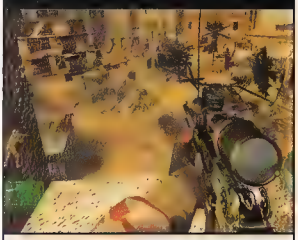
Don't be fooled into thinking this is some kind of flight sim. It's not. What it really turns out to be is an arcade-y vehicle-based shooter. The most common, and most successful, of the 20-plus single-player missions are ones where you cruise around in your ship completing some simple objectives and shooting any enemy vehicles or ground installations that try to stop you. The less successful ones have you manning a turret of some sort and taking on waves of attackers, but thankfully there aren't too many of those and they tend not to linger. There's also some light multiplayer support, but nothing to get too excited over.

There's a rather forgettable, but not too preposterous, sci-fi story replete with mostly-likable stereotypical characters, all of which sets the stage for the missions without dragging on too much. The voice work is somewhat cheesy but not altogether unpleasant, a sentiment that sort of sums up the whole game. *Aerial Strike* is budget. It feels budget. But for twenty or so bucks, eh, it's not that bad. You fly around shooting stuff for a while, it's sort of fun, and then it's over. Might not be a bargain, per se, but at the very least, it's a few steps above cheap. **–AF**

Our hero, Magnus Tide, and the object of his incessant, cheesy macking in one of the frequent, but thankfully never lengthy, cutscenes.

FOUR WORD REVIEWS

Sometimes you can say more with less. Here's a slightly shorter analysis of some recent games.



BLACK HAWK DOWN
"I snipe, you fall."

DOOM 3
"I need new pants."

THE ELDER SCROLLS: DAGGERFALL
"Save time! *click*.....ERROR?!?!"

Grand Theft Auto: Vice City
"Totally awesome '80s nostalgia"

Have some four-word reviews of your own? Send them to editor@cgonline.com

technicalities
by Kevin Rice

Dear Hardware Manufacturers

As technology advances, some hardware still lags behind on the usability front.

Ten years ago, an MPU-401 sound card was something of a novelty item for your computer, 3D accelerators were just coming onto the market, and a 15-inch monitor was a $500 purchase. Now, we have 5.1 or better digital audio, gigabit network adapters, and more, right on a $150 motherboard. A lot has changed to make the gaming experience on the PC friendlier and easier. If you remember having to play with EMS and IRQ settings in DOS, there's truly no comparison.

While it's great that many of today's products are truly plug-and-play, some hardware designs are the same as they were ten years ago. It's with that in mind that I write

"...please, find a better method for sealing your product."

an open letter to the hardware manufacturers. None of these suggestions are difficult to implement; rather, they're just tweaks to existing designs that would solve a lot of frustration.

Bigger is not always better: You've just bought that new peripheral, be it an external drive of some sort, a printer, or a new force feedback wheel. Everything's ready to go until you go to plug it in. And there it is: a transformer that takes three spaces on your power strip. You already have another transformer box hanging precariously off the end, and there's no room for the new one without some serious cord rearranging or a compromise in what's plugged in.

While I fully understand that some hardware needs these transformer boxes to properly condition the electricity, make a pass-through box where your transformer sits between the new hardware, and the electrical outlet. Many LCD monitors seem to have realized this, but there's still the occasional peripheral that forces you to make room for this giant plug. Stop that! Please.

The guessing game: You go to plug in your new speakers or you're simply switching from speakers to headphones. You look on the back of your computer, and the plugs are not labeled. They aren't even color-coded. Instead, you have some cryptic etching next to each plug that's just as silver as the back of the card. Without a flashlight or some memorization, you're just fumbling, hoping you got the cords correct.

Is it that difficult to color-code each output? It seemed as though the industry got it a few generations ago, then suddenly stopped and reverted back to the etching technique. Please, give us the green for input, blue for the microphone, and so on. Most motherboards with built-in sound do this, but the aftermarket sound cards have inexplicably stopped this process. Bring it back! Please.

Nothing more than a driver: When I install a new peripheral, I don't need every bell and whistle that goes with it. I usually have my computer set up exactly the way I want it, and I don't want some installation program to go and associate itself with every known file extension on my computer. Provide me with a stable driver that will run your peripheral and install the application that goes with it, if any. That's it.

I know that part of this is supposed to be the "value-added" portion of competing products, but I don't need something that will go and change my program associations. I really don't need anything that will start up with my computer, especially without even telling me. I want to control my 9-in-1 USB card reader with a driver and that's it. Windows XP is very good about these things, and I don't need your application to override it. Give me stable hardware and a rock solid driver and I'll be satisfied. And because it's a theme, I'll ask one more time. Please.

The origami package: I know that, often times, when you unpack that new piece of hardware, you have no intention of ever packing it back up. But sometimes, it's necessary. Maybe the hardware is broken. Maybe you have to return it for some other reason. Maybe you keep the packaging to safely move your equipment. Whatever the reason, it's sometimes necessary to repackage the equipment, and the manufacturer almost always requests the original packing.

While speakers are usually the worst culprit, things like gamepads and other smaller devices are usually hermetically sealed in some airtight plastic that requires an acetylene torch to open. I know it's an automated packing facility that does this, but please, find a better method for sealing your product. It has to ship, sure, and it has to handle bumps and bruises, but it doesn't have to require an exacto knife to open and a degree in physics to repack? Make it more user-friendly. Please.

In closing, while I'm all for progress and the advancement of technology, I hate being reminded of these relics when unpacking, plugging in, or otherwise trying to use my new toys. None of these requests is revolutionary, and in fact, they should be obvious. If you need to charge an extra dollar or two, I'll gladly pay. Just make the process of installing and using the hardware as great as the results. Please. ■

1970GX NEC/$599 ★★★★½

Has anyone ever complained about LCDs producing drab and colorless images? Most definitely have issues with blacks appearing gray, but colors are always vibrant and clear. And they're about to get even clearer. There's a new technology around going by various names depending on the company, and it makes displays even brighter. NEC-Mitsubishi's variant is called OptiClear DVM, and it's a feature of the 19-inch 1970GX "gamer" display.

As for the picture quality, whoa. This monitor produces, without question, the most gorgeous images. The 700:1 contrast ratio makes blacks blacker than most, the colors are super vibrant (perhaps too much out of the box), and text is razor sharp. Games look fantastic, and your desktop practically explodes off the screen. You can probably get a tan from the amount of light emitted from this monitor.

But.

Yes, there's a but. A big, giant but.

Without resorting to even more dubious metaphors, the only issue with the monitor is a big one. Under certain lighting and image conditions, particularly offices with overhead fluorescents and dark backgrounds (think *DOOM 3*), the screen is practically a mirror. It's really weird to be playing a game and see… you looking back at you. Under more "normal" lighting, such as in an apartment, it's not a serious issue. In very low gamer lighting, it's not a problem at all.

Feature-wise, it's perfect. It has an 8ms response time, the stand tilts and swivels, it has a USB 2.0 hub, and its thin-bezel design looks terrific. Keeping those lighting condition requirements in mind, this is a phenomenal display, one that manages to make most of the competition look positively dowdy in comparison. **–Steve Bauman**

CASE MOD OF THE MONTH

Are you a fan of Fritz Lang's classic 1926 film *Metropolis*? If so, you may appreciate this case from Paul Capello at thebestcasescenario.com. *Have an interesting case mod of your own?* Submit it to *editor@cgonline.com*.

ROLL YOUR OWN

If you're looking to build your own machine, or are in the market for a new one, you're faced with an overwhelming number of choices. This monthly guide gives you some basic starting information on the most critical components of any gaming system: processor and video.

Processor

Intel and AMD are slowly but surely releasing a new stream of chips. Right now, and as usual with the new chips, they are tough to come by and priced at a hefty premium. You don't need these monsters to play the latest and greatest games without stuttering through them though. A little simple shopping will yield some impressive values that will keep you up to speed.

Budget

Athlon 64 3400+/3.0GHz Pentium 4

Make sure to get the 800MHz FSB version of the Pentium, or the 939-pin Athlon (for upgrading purposes). At this price, both are tough to beat, price/performance wise. $170-$190

Sweet Spot

Athlon 64 3500+/3.4GHz Pentium 4

Again, go with either the 939-pin version of the Athlon or the 800MHz FSB on the Pentium. They aren't much faster than the "budget" chips, but that extra oomph comes for only $50 or so. $250

Ultimate

Athlon FX-55/3.46GHz Pentium 4 EE

They're the most expensive processors you can buy, but these processors will rip through even the most demanding applications. Intel has a 3.73GHz EE on the way. $800-$1000

Video

It's been a while since either ATI or NVIDIA has introduced a significant new videocard. Both offer extremely high-performance cards at a premium, but also offer more wallet-friendly alternatives.

Budget

ATI Radeon 9800/GeForce 6600

Note that the Radeon is not the "Pro" or "XT" flavor, and the GeForce is not the "GT" version. Both still provide a great value for the money and an excellent choice for the gamer on a budget. $125-$150

Sweet Spot

ATI Radeon X800 Pro/GeForce 6800GE

Sure, they're pricier, but the performance really kicks in with these cards. While they won't perform as well as the uber-cards, they will provide plenty of bang for the buck at around half the cost. $320

Ultimate

ATI Radeon X850 XT/GeForce 6800 Ultra

For the power user that needs to have top-of-the-line everything, these cards are it. These are the cards to have in order to experience games in all their high-resolution glory; hide the bill from your spouse to avoid an argument over their cost. $475-$550

Video Verisimilitude

You've got a limited budget and it's time for an upgrade, so which videocard should you buy? We run 17 cards through our tests to find out which models stand out

Let's say you still have an AGP system and are looking for a bit more performance. Your core system already has 1GB of RAM, a processor in the 1.5-3GHz range, and you're happy with the audio, so it's time to go shopping for videocards. You set your budget, head over to your favorite online store, and are confronted with complete chaos. There are dozens of new models, some with multiple variations (GT? XT? SE?). And what about older cards? Is an older high-end card actually faster than a mid-range new one?

These are some of the issues we hope to sort out with this article. We've run 17 cards through two tests, which show their relative performance (or more accurately, show how some cards are better with games that require Pixel Shaders 2.0 versus 1.0). We're only looking at AGP cards; we'll look at more PCI Express models down the road.

Almost every videocard released in the last year has 256MB of RAM; the older cards have 128MB, and we're also seeing a few mid-range cards return with 128MB of expensive high-speed DDR3 RAM. While more RAM is always better, it doesn't matter a lot if your card can't handle super high-resolutions, or the sharpest textures, or running games with full-screen anti-aliasing.

For ATI cards, we omitted most of the recent X line. The $450 X800 XT is the only model readily available in AGP, so we're primarily focusing on the previous generation Radeon cards, from the 9550 to the 9800XT (the X800XT is included in a separate chart for comparisons sake). For NVIDIA cards, the only one left out entirely is the high-end 6800 Ultra, which is over $500. We go back as far as the GeForceFX 5200, even including two models (FX5800 and 5900), which aren't readily available. (The FX5800—the famous "Hoover" model—was never really a consumer card.)

All testing was done at a single resolution, 1024x768, without anti-aliasing or anisotropic filtering enabled. The test platform was an Athlon FX-53 with 1GB of RAM; it's a high-end system, for sure, but we're testing the maximum potential speed of the videocard.

After testing all of the cards with *DOOM 3* and *3D Mark 2005*, the first thing that pops out is how much of a home run ATI hit with the Radeon 9700. That a nearly three-year old card can still perform decently in high-end testing is a testament to its quality. (It does not represent a particularly good value today, however.) Until ATI's X-series of cards, all future models were speed bumps. They perform equally well with *DOOM 3* and *3D Mark*, and the scores scale with memory and core speeds. It's pretty simple: if you want ATI, start with a 9600XT, ignore the dog-slow 9800SE, and consider a 9800 Pro if you're looking for solid performance at a reasonable price. (If you can pick up any used previous-generation Radeons, they're a terrific choice.)

For NVIDIA, the 5-series FX cards are solid performers with *DOOM 3*, but as shown with the *3D Mark* testing, they're practically useless with games that utilize pixel shaders 2.0. Because of this, it's hard to recommend any 5-series card.

However, the 6-series represent an enormous leap; in fact, they are the best value right now in AGP cards. The 6200 is the best $100-ish card, and the 6600GT delivers the best performance in its price

BENCHMARKS

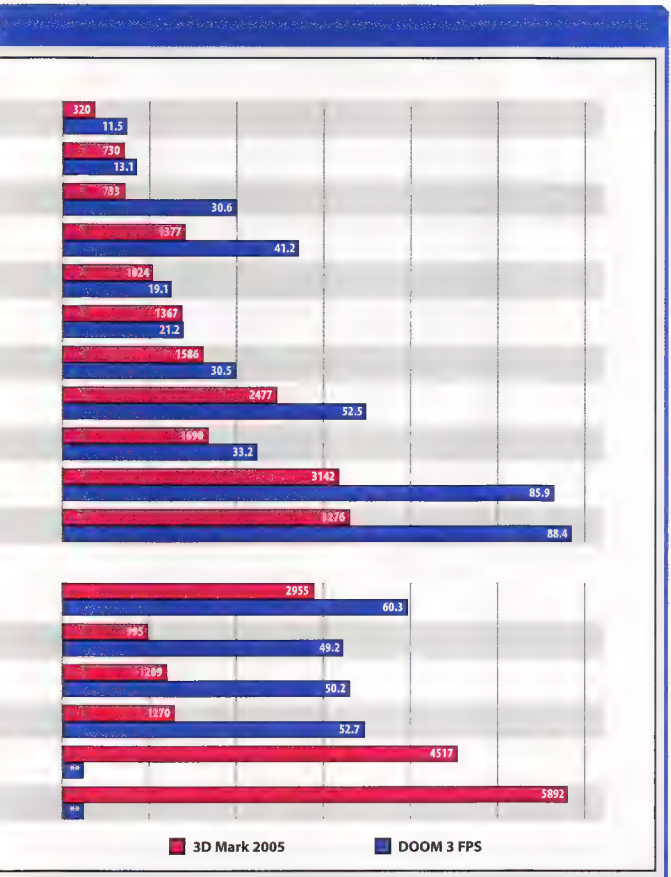
The Contenders

$50	GeForce FX5200 Ultra 128MB	650Mhz Memory/325Mhz Core
$60	Radeon 9550 128MB	200Mhz Memory/250Mhz Core
$75	GeForce FX5700 Ultra 128MB	900Mhz Memory/300Mhz Core
$100	GeForce 6200 128MB	550Mhz Memory/300Mhz Core
$100	Radeon 9600 256MB	200Mhz Memory/325Mhz Core
$120	Radeon 9800 SE 128MB	290Mhz Memory/380Mhz Core
$130	Radeon 9600 XT 128MB	300Mhz Memory/500Mhz Core
$150	Radeon 9800 Pro 128MB	337Mhz Memory/378Mhz Core
$175	Radeon 9700 Pro 128MB	270Mhz Memory/275Mhz Core
$190	GeForce 6600GT 128MB	1Ghz Memory/500Mhz Core
$210	GeForce 6600GT OC* 128MB	1.1Ghz Memory/525Mhz Core

Curiosities

$350	Radeon 9800 XT 256MB	365Mhz Memory/412Mhz Core
N/A	GeForce FX5800 Ultra 128MB	1Ghz Memory/500Mhz Core
N/A	GeForce FX5900 Ultra 256MB	850Mhz Memory/450Mhz Core
$400	GeForce FX5950 Ultra 256MB	950Mhz Memory/300Mhz Core
$360	GeForce 6800GT 256MB	1000Mhz Memory/350Mhz Core
$450	Radeon X800XT 256MB	560Mhz Memory/520Mhz Core

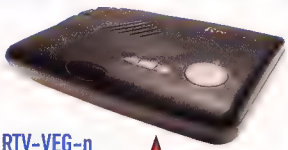
***The "OC" stands for overclocked; it's a special model from BFG that comes overlocked from the factory.**



**DOOM 3 maxes out at 100FPS, and both these cards peg it at that number.

range, turning in superb numbers for around $200. If you can swing the extra bucks, it's definitely the pick of the litter. (Though if you can scrounge another $100, there's a 6800, and if you don't eat for a month, the GT or X800… it never ends.) **–Steve Bauman**

All tests run on an Athlon FX-53 with 1GB of RAM. The only resolution tested was 1024x768, with no anti-aliasing or anisotropic filtering. The price is an average from multiple vendors found via newegg.com, and is accurate as of the publication of this article. ATI cards supplied by ATI, Gigabyte, and Atlantis. NVIDIA cards supplied by NVIDIA, BFG, eVGA, PNY, and XFX.



RTV-VEG-n

RTV/MSRP $89.99

★★★★½

Computer Games EDITOR'S CHOICE

Maybe you're living in a crammed dorm room, or your family doesn't appreciate you monopolizing the TV for all your console games. Maybe you don't have room for a television and a monitor in the same room, but you have equipment that wants both. Whatever the reason, the wonderfully named RTV-VEG-n allows you to hook up your computer, a television feed, and several other sources of video input (including S-Video and component input) to one monitor.

If you use a system selector for hooking up multiple consoles or other video devices, you can put that monitor to a lot of uses. The VEG-n also handles the audio portion of things, with a standard 1/8" audio output that will feed right into any speakers you have. There are even parental controls, 4:3 and 16:9 aspect ratio settings, and more.

The remote control isn't exactly ergonomic. It's rather boxy and rectangular, and the button layout isn't exactly conducive to no-look operation, but the RTV-VEG-n is still an exceptional product. If you've upgraded to an LCD, that old monitor can become an excellent high-resolution display for your consoles, or pretty much anything else. **–Kevin Rice**

LG L1980U LG/$549 ★★★½

The big draw of this fine 19-inch, 12ms response time LCD from LG is its rotating and pivoting screen. It bends backwards, rotates, pivots, and generally behaves like a granola-eating yoga master. Included software lets the Windows desktop adjust accordingly on the fly, though this feature admittedly isn't much use for gaming. The monitor's only real weakness is purely one of aesthetics—it looks like it was assembled from parts of three separate units. You have a white back—with an enormous LG logo—that looks like an Apple reject; there's a chrome base that just looks cheesy and, well, like chromed plastic; and there's a nice, thin, black bezel with a slick on/off button. The design is schizophrenic; the performance and screen, though, is otherwise solid. **–Steve Bauman**

Two Is Better Than One

Computer Games EDITOR'S CHOICE

If 300 frames per second isn't enough, the **Alienware SLI** is your dream machine BY KEVIN RICE

★ ★ ★ ★ ½

Manufacturer Alienware **MSRP (as tested, without monitor)** $4750

Alienware has a long history of producing extremely high-end gaming machines, and its latest machine, the Aurora SLI, is a gaming machine without peer.

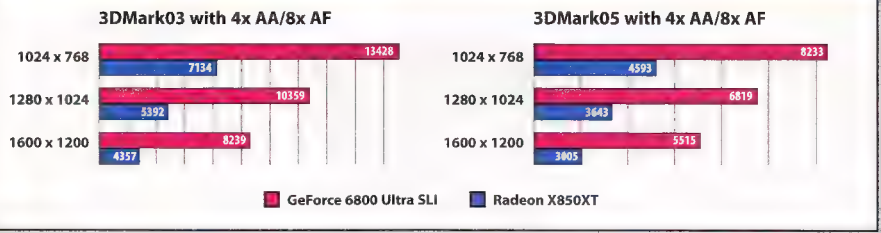
While there's only so many things you can throw into a computer to make it faster, the emergence of PCI Express has helped bring back a concept not seen since the days of the 3Dfx Voodoo cards: using multiple videocards to boost your framerate. Dubbed SLI, it may bring back memories of "Scan Line Interleave," the method used by a pair of Voodoo cards to draw every other line of your computer screen, but today SLI stands for Scalable Link Interface. Theoretically, you can put a videocard in all your PCI Express slots and link them. For now, we'll stick with the pair of GeForce 6800 Ultras in Alienware's Aurora 7500 SLI.

In addition to getting a thousand bucks worth of videocards, you get the standard Alienware treatment: an FX-55 processor with a gigabyte of DDR-RAM, an Audigy 2 ZS, a DVD-Writer and optionally, a beautiful Alienware-branded 20.1" Benq LCD monitor.

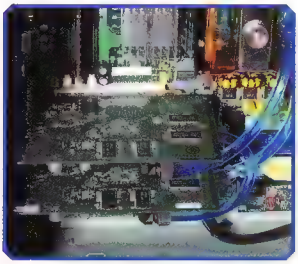
If you follow videocards at all, you already know that NVIDIA's GeForce 6800 Ultra card and ATI's X850XT Platinum are the current speed kings in the videocard world. While the X850XT is slightly faster in most tests, there's just no comparison when you compare it to a double-barreled NVIDIA counterattack.

This new version of SLI is not a simple alternating scan line drawing, meaning it isn't just dividing the drawing of the screen evenly between the two cards. Instead, the "Scalable Link" means that the load balance is distributed between the two cards as is needed by what's being displayed. For example, in most FPS games, it's the lower two-thirds or so of the screen that is very busy, while the top is often just a sky-box

BENCHMARKS



Alienware Aurora 7500 with SLI: AMD Athlon FX-55, 1GB RAM, two NVIDIA 6800 Ultra videocards using 7.1.2.2 Detonator drivers; Alienware ALX Specs (the machine used for comparison testing): AMD Athlon FX-55, 1GB RAM, ATI Radeon X850XT Platinum using the 5.2 Catalyst Driver Suite. 3DMark03 run using Build 3.5.0 patch, 3DMark05 run using the Build 1.2.0 patch.



Two videocards; it's so 1996

graphic or some other static image. Therefore, the videocards concentrate their considerable horsepower on the bottom two-thirds of the screen. This is all done dynamically as the scene changes, and you can turn on a little window to see just what part of screen each card is handling.

You won't really notice that you're utilizing two videocards, though, at least until you turn on the framerate display in your favorite game. There was not a single hiccup in the performance of even the most demanding games like *Half-Life 2* and *Doom 3*, even when the screen was extremely busy. In an older game like *Call of Duty*, it maintains over 500 frames per second at 1600x1200, with every bell and whistle on. Is it overkill? Yes. Does it impress the neighbors? Yes. Can you get called bad names if you bring it up one too many times on voice chat? Absolutely.

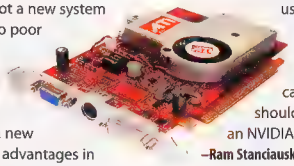
Other notables include the usual pristine interior of the machine, the included Microsoft mouse and keyboard (although they aren't wireless like those with the Alienware ALX), the clean installation of Windows XP Professional with every update already installed, and rock-solid performance. The only criticism are the ones typically leveled at systems from Alienware: the case is enormous, weighing as much as a king-size mattress and spring set, and there are no front panel-audio inputs.

However, that's really the biggest complaint. The workmanship, performance, and overall quality of this Alienware is superb. Yes, it's not exactly fair to compare a machine with dual videocards to one without, but there's nothing else to use as a baseline. As with all bleeding-edge computer products, it comes at a rather hefty premium. But if you have the money, and an insatiable need for impossibly high framerates, there's no other machine that comes close. ■

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

You have answers, we have questions. Or vice versa. If you need an immediate response, you can pop into our forum at cgonline.com and ask away; operators are standing by 24-7 to take, and occasionally answer, your questions. Continue sending missives and/or photos of hot and sweaty videocards to qa@cgonline.com.

Q: I recently got a new system and was too poor to get a nice graphics card. Now that I have the money, I would like to get a new card. Will I see any advantages in waiting to purchase a card, say, for a month or two? I'm looking at a budget of anywhere up to about $250-300. Also, should I stay away from the low-end high-end cards (like the 6800 LE) compared to a mid-range card like the 6600GT? **–Kevin**



A: *You can always benefit from waiting. A "newer, faster, and better" card is always somewhere down the road. To answer you question, the 6600GT is definitely the hot ticket in that price range, despite only having 128MB of RAM. Next month, we should have a full rundown of all moderately priced PCI Express cards to compliment our AGP roundup this month.*

Q: After I'm finished with a session of play with any of the games loaded on my computer, my computer runs very slowly, seeming to take a very long time with tasks that should take a short time. Any ideas on how to remedy the situation? **–Joe Zabinski**

A: *This is typically an issue with fragmented hard drives and/or systems with 512MB of RAM. Your games use up all of your RAM, so they start using your hard drive for storage. After you close a game, your system might need some time to calm down from the disk thrashing that just took place. The solution is usually more RAM, and a good defragmentation.*

Q: I have 5.1 speakers, yet I haven't been able to have all of the speakers utilized playing DVDs, music, and games. I have set the sound card's speaker setting to 5.1, and have been through many other menus and options throughout all the programs I use. I was wondering if my sound card isn't compatible with 5.1. It's an on-board sound card, and I know I shouldn't have chosen it; it's an NVIDIA nForce audio. **–Ram Stanciauskas**

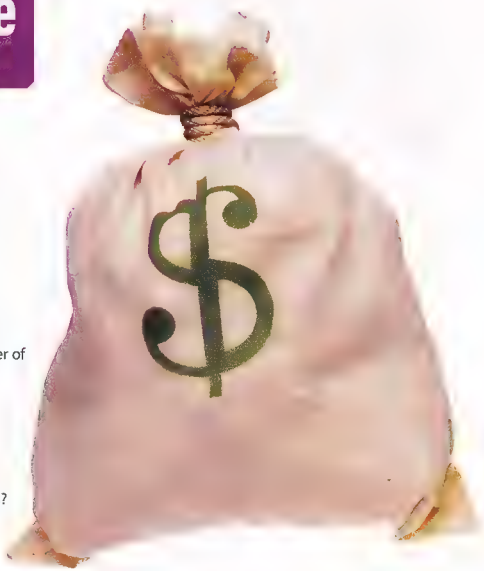
A: *Actually, the nForce is an excellent sound choice, particularly compared to other on-board audio. But not all of its implementations support 5.1. Check with your motherboard manufacturer. If you do have a 5.1 setup, you won't get it from music unless it's DVD audio. Beyond that, there should be an nForce application that lets you test all five speakers; if it shows that all are working, it's a software issue with individual applications. If not, update your nForce drivers, make sure all of the speaker wires are connected, and pray to the audio gods.*

road to nowhere

by Cindy Yans

Cash and Carry

Third-party sale of virtual stuff is here to stay



Not all that long ago, I wanted to pick the brain of a friend with whom I'd played *EverQuest* for a number of years about an issue I've been waffling about for quite some time now. To protect his identity, I'll call him Trevor. Er, never mind. I'll call him Otto. And he is real. And this verbatim (really):

Me: So, have you ever heard of IGE?

Otto: What's that?

Me: IGE? The virtual currency broker? For online RPGs?

Otto: Ugh... those people should all be stripped down, lacerated with razors, and forced to roll in salt and lemon juice.

Me: Why?

Otto: Because they are destroying games for millions by turning a freaking videogame into a business for themselves.

Me: How are they destroying them?

Otto: Buying and selling items and gold for real cash screws up the game economy, and keeps [the people] who want to play legitimately from being able to do things because those assholes are sitting there farming the stuff. It's a bunch of shit.

Me: Hmmm.

Otto: Now let me tell you how I really feel...

Do you get the sense that he was pissed off? He was. And I won't expose you to the equally raw foulness that came next, except to say that he became so incensed that a period of time went by when we were just about "not speaking to each other." It was so elementary school.

The third party buying and selling of virtual goods from MMOs has been around forever, and there are countless opinions about every single aspect of this practice. Opinions range from those who envision an evil empire that runs sweatshops where child laborers are forced to spend 16 hours a day feverishly working at computer terminals farming gold and items in return for a crust of bread, to those who see a sound and lucrative business arising from the knowledge of human nature and supply and demand, to those who simply, at a gut level, see a practice that is "just wrong."

Over the last month, I've spoken with, written to, and heard from a lot of people—developers, publishers, players, third party facilitators, hyenas (some would argue that the latter two present a redundancy), and it seems that the existence of Santa Claus is, for the most part, a matter of opinion. In other words, when it comes to buying and selling virtual goods, nothing seems concrete. An entire tome could be devoted to this issue and the questions it raises, but in a meta-view, I think there are four overall topics to think about: 1) Does buying and selling virtual currency and items present an ethical dilemma? 2) Is the gameplay somehow cheapened when real-word currency enters into the equation? 3) Is it illegal?, and 4) do players think the practice diminishes their contribution? Does it "break" the game?

I don't find the practice unethical (please don't hit me). I firmly believe that time and money are currencies of equal value, and it's generally true that folks have more of one than the other. If getting that next epic item costs one person $99 another 15 hours, they each have used the currency available to them. Whether the person who spent 15 hours has an extra $99 is irrelevant. Spending 15 hours was his or her choice. Personally, I prefer to spend the time. It "feels" better, somehow, but I don't resent the person who has less time than he needs to enjoy the game as much as I do (leveling, being able to "keep up" with friends, etc.).

Is the gameplay "cheapened?" Is the accomplishment of someone who spent a zillion hours to gain something somehow diminished by the guy who got the same result via cash on demand? Well, is it? Are people's self-esteem and pride in hard effort dependent on "what the other guy did?" I think, for the most part, that those who hold this as their biggest criticism would want to answer "yes," "yes," "yes," and "no," to those questions respectively. That last answer, though, would have to be "yes" for those people, and that's pretty sad… we're talking about a game here. Isn't it about the process? Are those who choose to skip the process—which was enjoyable, right?—somehow less deserving or "noble" individuals? I hope not.

"If currency farmers grief other players, or prevent them from accessing game elements in any way, yes, that ruins the game"

As for legality, perhaps the dissection of this issue would be the most verbose chapter of all in that tome. Despite the publishers' pointing to their EULAs as black and white proof that their intellectual property rights are violated by this practice, it's still very murky in terms of how virtual items relate to IP. How the law should apply to virtual items is a concept that's still evolving. And without a law degree or a big bucketload of precedents, I'm not going to touch this issue—not until it's very well legislated by people who do.

Finally, does this practice ruin the game? For gamers, this is the most important question of all, right? If currency farmers grief other players, or prevent them from accessing game elements in any way, yes, that ruins the game. Dealing harshly with this type of griefing is well within the developers' rights—in fact, it's their duty to keep the game free of this sort of thing. How? I wish I knew. Does it ruin the economy? It can, but the issue here lies in the design of the economy. Developers have built in all sorts of mechanisms over the years to "fix" stuff like camping and twinking, binding items to a player so as not to make them a function of money (i.e. most of the time you can't buy the best items in the game, you need to find them), etc. They need to find a way to make the inevitable inflation more of a non-issue.

Like it or not, the currency market is here to stay and, considering the amount of money changing hands, it's only going to get bigger, so systems to integrate it need to be put in place. Personally, I prefer not to play with real cash, but people who do are not going to spoil my fun. Do they really, really spoil yours? Think about it. ■

MMOCABULARY

Can't tell your PvEs from your PvPs? We'll help.

MOB

A non-player character (especially a hostile one). First coined from its use in the source code for the old Diku MUD (multi-user dungeon) engine, the term is an abbreviation of "mobile" (or mobile object). It, er, stuck.

BUYING AND SELLING

It's not uncommon to hear something like the following broadcasts in the General Chat Channel of many MMOs: "WTB Blade of Butt-kicking, offer 150GP, PST" or "WTS The Manhandler, asking 300GP, PST"

GP Gold pieces
TELL Whatever method a game employs for private conversation between players
WTB Want to buy
WTS Want to sell
WTT Want to trade
PST Please send tell

WTF

While it may jump out at you as "Want to Find," it's actually… ('nuf said.)

POWERLEVEL

EverQuest II

If you're in your early to mid twenties—okay, if your *EverQuest II* character is in its early to mid twenties, you'll find it very lucrative to fight in Thundering Steppes. The Hill Giants there drop an idol that sells via broker for around 10GP. Good experience too.

Meat Lovers Unite

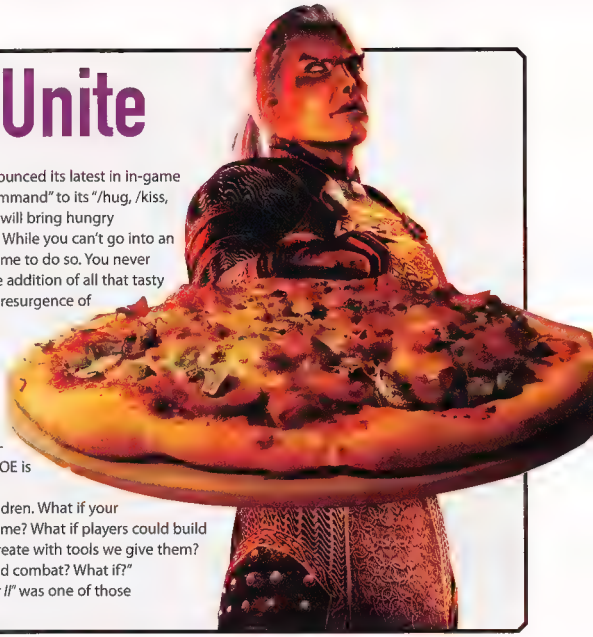
Pepperoni comes to Norrath, finally

Master of marketing Sony Online Entertainment has announced its latest in in-game advertising plans, one which adds a brand-new "slash command" to its "/hug, /kiss, /tickle" entourage of emotes. The new "/pizza" command will bring hungry *EverQuest II* players directly to Pizza Hut's official website. While you can't go into an *EverQuest* tavern and order, you don't have to quit the game to do so. You never have to quit the game. Or leave your house. And with the addition of all that tasty Mountain Dew you can order, perhaps Sony will create a resurgence of the handy Internet Urinal. Never have to leave….

In other *EverQuest* news, SOE president John Smedley made a somewhat surprising post on the official *EverQuest* website. He heaped praise on its now high-profile competitor Blizzard for its obvious success with *World of WarCraft*, calling the game "spectacular." However, he made it clear that his company is not cowering in the least. He proposes many possible things that SOE is considering implementing in a series of "what ifs."

"What if you could have families in MMO's? Virtual Children. What if your characters could have children and pass on the family name? What if players could build fantastic dungeons that become part of the worlds we create with tools we give them? How would that work exactly? Can MMOs have skill-based combat? What if?"

No one knows if "… you could order pizza in *EverQuest II*" was one of those "what if" statements.



TRUE CONFESSIONS OF A SERIAL BETA TESTER

He plays, he writes, he plays some more: The continuing story of Craig: 2054 AD.

AS TRANSLATED VIA SOME WEIRD TIME/SPACE CONTINUUM THING BY KELLY WAND

Pathological behavior is a given in the nutty world of computer gaming, and the whole massively-multiplayer online phenomenon has only made it worse. Although heavily medicated, serial beta tester Craig X managed to crawl to the surface of his consciousness, more or less, to share some thoughts about his life in testing, and perhaps offer some insight about how he turned into the mess he is today.

2/10/54

I've been a serial beta tester for numerous MMOs ever since I was 12. That was way back in 2002, when I was still young and full of white-hot ambition and yellow piss-and-vinegar. After every major game company turned down my pitch for an MMO set in the near future, to be called *2003*, I learned C ++ and began working on it solo. It's tough work, writing your own game from the ground up all by yourself, but I've kept at it, and am already almost half done designing a 2003 version of my own bedroom. Needless to say, sweet diary, I've had to beta test on the side ever since just to keep afloat, and a pessimist would probably see my testing a new, expensive studio-made MMO title called *2004* as the writing on the wall that my work is taking too long, that I may never finish, that somewhere along the way, I went from aspiring designer and world-builder to failure. I got one word for those naysayers: whatever. My game will come out too, and players, especially discerning ones, will be able to make up their own minds. Conceptually they have nothing in common at all; they take place months apart. What are you people *on*? *… to be continued?*

Massively Massive

Mythic Entertainment wants *Dark Age of Camelot's* Realm vs. Realm combat to rival all attempts at creating huge, immense, epic, (really big) PvP battles. Its new server-spanning technology allows players from several servers to join in one game space allowing as many as 1,500 players to enter combat at the same time. While the technology is impressive, this move is actually more illustrative of Mythic's genuine reaction to its player community. People on lower population servers complained that 'there's nobody (relatively) to play with me,' so Mythic has solved their problem. Also, with that many simultaneous players, there has to be someone who fights worse than you do.

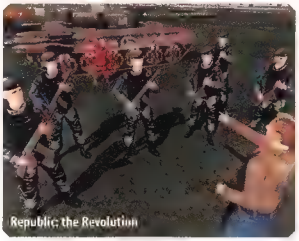
Pop-up Anarchy

Funcom has teamed up with Massive, Inc., to implement the latter's dynamic in-game advertising during the gameplay of those who are taking advantage of Funcom's 'free until 2006' offer for *Anarchy Online*. Paying customers will not see these in-game ads. In addition to its deal with Funcom, Massive has also engaged Vivendi Universal Games, UbiSoft, Atari, and others to take advantage of its technology and ad network (hence taking advantage of what you all knew has been a huge untapped ad space for some time).

Just imagine, in the middle of a tense battle, all of a sudden you see, 'Pepsi! Every Orc's favorite!'

Elixir goes MMO

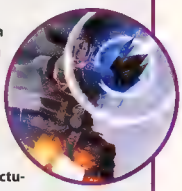
UK developer Elixir Studios has announced that it is working with Nicely Crafted Entertainment in the development of first-person space-based MMO, *Republic Dawn: Chronicles of the Seven*. Elixir's previous title, *Republic: the Revolution*, is a single-player game, but *Dawn* is still being billed as its sequel. Like the first *Republic*, *Dawn* will offer a political, economic, and military struggle for supremacy. Nicely Crafted already has some experience in this area with its first game, the space-based RTS, *Time of Defiance*. This coup, however, will have to wait until 2007.



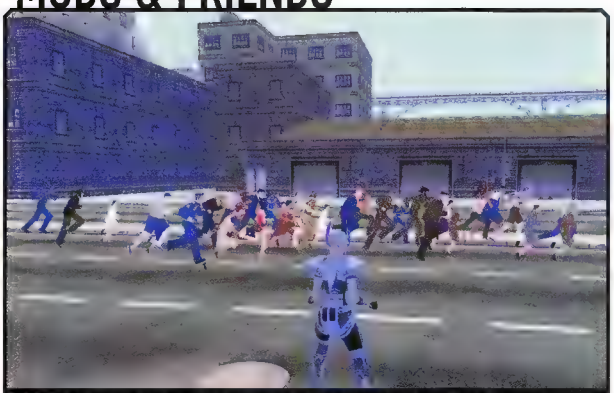
Republic: the Revolution

MMOBYTES

GTA goes APB—It's an urban jungle out there. Webzen announced that it will publish *All Points Bulletin*, an urban combat-themed MMO where law-abiding squads face off against law-ignoring gangs, and merry havoc and carnage ensue. Developed by Real Time Worlds, the game is the brainchild of David Jones, one of the creators of the *Grand Theft Auto* franchise. The game is slated to release in early 2007, most likely for Xbox and PC. Webzen is also producing *Huxley*, a sci-fi FPS MMO that will put Epic's next-generation *Unreal* engine to the test. Look for this one in 2006.... Absorbing Mythica—Sony Online has announced that it is expanding and taking Seattle by storm, or by Fire, actually. Sony acquired a number of members of FireAnt, a team of former Microsoft Games Studios staffers who worked on the now cancelled MMO *Mythica*. There is no word at this writing about its plans for the Seattle location.... Get a Car—NetDevil's car combat MMO Auto Assault is now accepting beta applications for folks to try the game out before its launch later this year. Accelerate to plaync.com for more details....

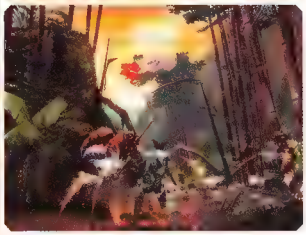


MOBS & FRIENDS



It's hard to know what exactly is going on in this screenshot from City of Heroes. Maybe someone announced that there's a sale at Wal-Mart.

This is what it's all about. Players vs. players, players vs. monsters. It's all good, baby.



Massively Different

Can Guild Wars change the way we think of, pay for, and play online role-playing games?

Developer Arena.net **Publisher** NCSoft **Release Date** April 2005

The Buzz: It remains to be seen whether the revolution will be televised, but one will be coming to an Internet near you on April 28th. That's the date that *Guild Wars* goes live, and if ex-Blizzard brain trust and Arena.net founders Mike O'Brien, Patrick Wyatt, and Jeff Strain have their way, a lot of the things once assumed to be intrinsic properties of massively multiplayer online role-playing will get kicked to the curb of the information super-highway when it does. Built for a pick-up-and-play, with an emphasis on player skill over character power, *Guild Wars* is primed to either turn the MMO world on its head or die trying… without charging a monthly fee.

> **"Guild Wars is primed to either turn the MMO world on its head or die trying…."**

It sounds like a lot to ask, doubly so considering the current MMO model is based on little more than accumulation of stuff over time. You gain more levels, so you can fight harder monsters, so you can get better loot, ad infinitum, all the while dropping a monthly donation to your online crack dealer of choice. But what if the rules were different? What if all missions took place in instances made just for your party, and were scripted to really make your character feel like a hero? What if traveling across the world to meet your buddies didn't take half an hour, but instead happened instantaneously? What if your incentive to play wasn't just to chase that next carrot on a stick but the gameplay itself, to compete against other players in a persistent world where your skill at the game mattered more than the uberness of your character?

These are the ideas that led Arena.net's founding troika to walk away from Blizzard, to diverge from the direction it was headed in with *World of WarCraft*, and project their own vision over the online landscape. "We had been trying for a long time to create role-playing games in which everyone wants to build up their characters and then compete against their friends and see how they stack up," explains O'Brien. "But the role-playing games out there just didn't support that. There was no real competition. It tended to be the person who had played the most hours just won every time."

To avoid this problem, the team came up with what they call Ascension, which is a fancy way of saying your character caps out on leveling and ceases to get numerically better, but without losing the ability to improve. "A lot of games feel like they're over at the time you reach max level," says O'Brien. "In *Guild Wars*, the missions are only part way

Ascalon, beautiful and pastoral. At least it was until the Charr dropped flaming rocks on it, the big meanies.

through when you get there, and there's this whole big part of the game left to play. The game is designed so the bottleneck isn't, 'Can you get to max level? Can you get good armor?' We assume you're going to. We make it possible to do that. And then there are lots and lots of things to do to keep evolving your character and evolving your skill after you've already done that."

Primary among those continuing things to do will be accumulating more skills to add to your repertoire in preparation for Player vs. Player battles. Inspired in part by collectable card games, a great deal of *Guild Wars*' strategic depth comes from its skill system, in which characters can gain access to hundreds of skills based on their primary and secondary classes, but may only bring eight into any given mission. The key to success then becomes not only picking eight skills that work for your character, but sixty four skills that work together over the eight man teams that will compete in tournaments. There's also the matter of using appropriate tactics based on the map type to make those skills shine, all the while reacting and adapting to the skills and tactics being used by your opponents.

But what may be the single most amazing thing about *Guild Wars* is that Arena.net will launch and support it without charging players a monthly fee to play. Instead they plan to release additional content in the form of two chapters a year, each with content of the same scope and scale as the original game, each of which will be optional for players to buy. "I firmly believe this is a better business model than the subscription fee business model," professes O'Brien with great conviction, "and I know it's a business model that the industry is scared about right now. But although the business model of selling chapters instead of charging a subscription fee does mean you're making less money per user, it allows you to attract a lot more users."

Will more users come to play? Will enough of them buy into Arena.net's core concept, paying for content rather than paying for time? Ready or not, the revolution is coming, and it should be one hell of a show. **–Adam Fleet**

Ultimate Baseball Online

Step up to the virtual plate

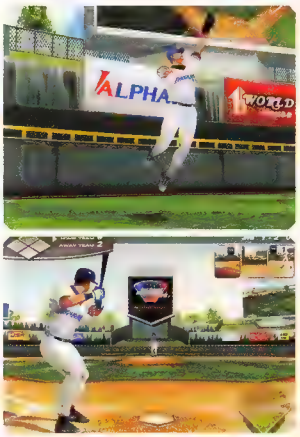
Developer/Publisher Netamin
Release Date April 2005

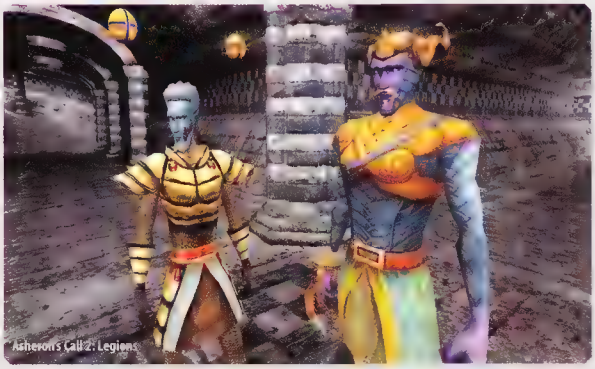
It's Like: Massively Major League
The Buzz: *Ultimate Baseball Online* is bringing the national pastime to the world of online gaming. It's baseball without pesky computer AI, with 18 humans battling it out on the virtual diamond. Having no AI controlled players allows for some truly unique gaming moments, like when a player tries to stretch a double into a triple and gets thrown out at third and his real-life teammates give him an earful. And if you strike out with the bases loaded, there truly will be no joy in this virtual Mudville.

With all of the potential greatness that comes with an online-only sports game, there is the question of whether or not someone really wants to bat eighth and play left field for a full nine innings. Of course, the downtime while waiting to bat can also be spent chatting with other players.

Developer Netamin had planned on releasing the game in the fall of 2004, but decided to hold off until April of this year so that a shiny new graphics engine could be substituted; it now sports a much better look, and has many core elements found in traditional online RPGs. When you create

The new graphics engine delivers more player detail.





Callback

Turbine steps out on its own to breathe new life into Asheron's Call

BY CINDY YANS

Developer/Publisher Turbine Inc. **Release date** May 2005

The Buzz: Late in 1999, *Asheron's Call* was the first major MMO to break out of the Dwarvian, Elvian, Wizardarian mold into a quirkier world of high-but-not-sci sci-fi. While its land of Dereth didn't become quite the household word that its compatriots' Norrath and Britannia did, the game nonetheless has enjoyed a very passionate, if not overwhelmingly huge, following. Since its release, and during its expansion *Dark Majesty* and its sequel *Asheron's Call 2: Fallen Kings*, Turbine has continued to believe in its long-term viability and to support its solid community. At the end of 2003, the developer acquired the rights to the titles from initial publisher Microsoft and, like solid indie developer Irrational Games, has decided to self-publish.

While it's unlikely that Turbine will acquire the rights to its other titles in development—*Dungeons & Dragons Online* and *Middle Earth Online*—it has decided to enhance its latest acquisition with expansions, one for the original *Asheron's Call* and another for its sequel. These releases have has surprised a lot of folks, as the burgeoning MMO genre appears to be exploding new properties in every direction.

Asheron's Call 2: Legions will be the first expansion for the sequel, and its story centers around the mysterious Empyreans. No one ever knows how the heck this happens, but this is one of those rather implausible (*EverQuest*-ian) situations in which a new continent somehow pops out of nowhere. Knorr is a massive continent ostensibly composed completely of powdered Hollandaise sauce. It adds more than 30% to the size of the game world, and allows you to have a playable Empyrean character for the first time. With 300 new skills and abilities, 3 prestige classes, a new hero system, and alternate advancement model—as well as the usual addition of dungeons, monsters, and quests—it appears as though this expansion will be a "meaty" one, well worth waiting for.

"There is stuff that we were able to do with *Legions* that make us really competitive with everything else out there," says lead designer Kevin Lambert. "What we had to do was to become a 'service' for players—tech support, customer service, sub-

your character, you assign skill points to certain attributes such as arm strength, speed, power, and so on. As you play more games, your player earns more points that can be spent to improve his or her ability on the field.

Fully customized league support is planned, with the ability to create team logos and colors. You can also play pick-up games if you just want to log in and have some fun without organizing a full league.

Though it's been available as a free beta for a while now, the updated *Ultimate Baseball Online* should launch before the start of the baseball season. You can step up to the virtual plate for $9.95/month at ultimatebaseballonline.com. **–William Abner**

SUN

Webzen targets American gamers with its latest MMO offering

Developer/Publisher Webzen
Release Date Late 2005

It's Like: Nintendo Lineage

The Buzz: *Soul of the Ultimate Nation* is the somewhat unwieldy title of Korean publisher Webzen's upcoming MMO, slated to hit the American market in late 2005. Known more conveniently as *SUN*, it's the latest from a developer/publisher already well established in Taiwan, China, Korea, and Japan as a purveyor of online games. Touted as having a more "console feel," a heavy action element, and rich graphics, *SUN* also promises some features that are rather rare for American-market MMOs. There is a battle zone system, where you can choose the maps you fight on, your degree of difficulty, and even the types of enemies you'll fight. The combat system is, according to Webzen, "stylish," with intuitive controls—yet another homage to classic console RPG combat set ups.

Webzen is definitely an Asia-focused company, but like NC Soft, it seems determined to break into the US market. While there's precious little detail available on just what exactly *Soul of the Ulimate Nation* will offer, the screenshots and artwork are

The original Asheron's Call is showing its age, though its makeover helps a lot. Asheron's Call 2, however, still looks competitive.

scription model—we really have to be sure that they're getting their $12.95 worth."

But why re-vamp the older game? *Throne of Destiny* for the original *Asheron's Call* is being guided by industry veteran Jessica Mulligan, whose team Lambert describes as "rabid about the game." It's a matter of community it seems. Very real communities have developed making it tough to "move on" from these older games, so giving it new life seemed to be the best solution. Most notably, there is a major graphics update and a completely new interface. You can now play the Viamontians, and there'll be a full complement of weapons and armor at your disposal. The level cap is being raised from 126 to 275, which will give the most long-time players new goals to shoot for. Augmentation Gems will enhance abilities and hundreds of special rare items will be added, in seven tiers of levels, ranging from interesting and useful tools to very powerful weapons and armor.

Perhaps the most fun thing they showed us, though, was the inclusion of the Drudge, an iconic monster from *AC2*, as a playable character. Anyone who pre-orders *Legions* will be able to play this creature from the get-go, although it will be unlockable for all players with a level requirement of approximately 60. This little guy looks like a combination of *Lord of the Rings*' Gollum, and *Harry Potter*'s Dobby, with a tongue-in-cheek skill-set including things like "Tasty Centipede," and "Wriggling Morsel." He also has his "rabid friend," a fluffy bunny companion that kicks a lot of ass. With no full armor, he'll have something like a "thick skin" skill to compensate, not to mention the bunny's killer Feet of Fury attack. You really have to see it.

Perhaps the most telling claim to the series' lasting popularity, though, is that it has been the first game that has been moderately successful in adding regular episodic content—something players have said they wanted since the days of MUDs. And if you give them what they want, well, they'll say, "Hey! That's not what we wanted." Such is an MMO community fan base. So often, though, they just don't leave—which is what Turbine is banking on in keeping the world of Dereth alive.

promising, and the company plans a huge marketing effort involving both *SUN* and other PC and console titles for later this year. The company is establishing a full-scale development, publishing, and distribution subsidiary in Los Angeles to make this happen. They certainly have the experience, at least in Asia; one of Webzen's games, *MU: Continent of Legend*, boasts of over 56 million users and 500,000 concurrent players from Asia alone. Numbers like that have attracted at lot of attention, including from console giant Nintendo, which is worried that characters in one of Webzen's titles, *Wiki*, look a little too much like *The Legend of Zelda: The Wind Walker*'s Link. –**Cindy Yans**

But Diablo! How have you become so pale? And naked...

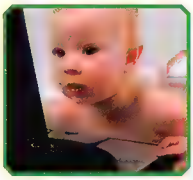
out of the box

by Brett Todd

Birth of a Gaming Nation

Hollywood meets mods in Birthstar: Frontline

Does computer gaming have the opportunity to "bloom into the most effective medium of story-telling"? Hollywood screenwriter Matthew Collins is putting that notion to the test with *Birthstar: Frontline*, a new mod project based on a sci-fi universe that he originally developed as an idea for television or motion pictures.



"He expected some skepticism, largely due to the fact that most of the mod community is under the age of 18."

"Just like the advent of talkies, many people are reluctant to believe that story is what drives many interactive experiences," explains Collins. "There are noted exceptions, of course, and these exceptions generally encompass the most widely accepted and successful games in the industry. While I could wax intellectual forever about the philosophy of interactive storytelling and its potential, I'm confident that *Birthstar: Frontline* will speak for me on that subject in the years to come."

Given those beliefs, it shouldn't surprise you to learn that *Birthstar: Frontline* isn't your usual mod. Collins aims to create the first level of a game for use as a "proof of concept" that can be shopped to publishers. He has already written the backstory of the *Birthstar* universe, a setting that began as a futuristic retelling of WWII and evolved into a billion-year saga dealing with the origins of humanity, and now he wants to turn this vision into a game.

Of course, there's a catch. Collins is a writer and gamer who first had this idea earmarked for the Sci-Fi Channel. He's not a programmer, so he needs a team of talented *Unreal Tournament 2004* modders to bring his ideas to life. The focus will be on "hyper-realistic" gameplay in the tradition of *Rainbow Six* and *Ghost Recon*, but with the intensity of *Call of Duty*. It is to feature a cooperative mode allowing as many as 16 players to take part in the story-based campaign. Each will even take on the role of a unique character with a defined role to play in the military unit that is central to the plot.

Response from the mod community has been mixed. Despite the detailed design doc and a connection to a known Hollywood player in David Carson (serving as Collins' partner and producer here), many modders seem downright suspicious. The Mod Database Forums thread devoted to the call for assistance degenerated into accusations that the whole thing was a "scam," or that Collins was trying to get modders to work for free on a project that only he would eventually cash in on.

Collins was taken aback by this slightly frosty reception. He expected "an understandable level of skepticism," largely due to "the fact that most of the mod community is under the age of 18, and still hasn't come to grips with the fact that creating games, telling a story, is a viable career path." Still, he has been shown "outstanding" work from prospective design team members, and remains "continually inspired by the amount of talent and enthusiasm emanating from the mod community."

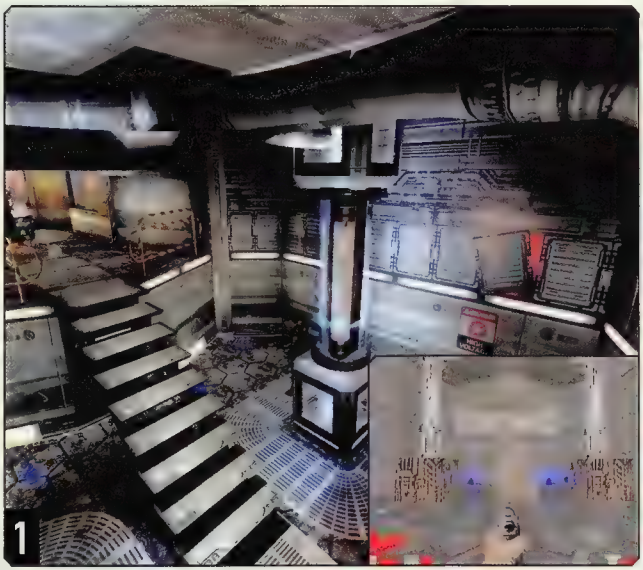
All of the above underlines how hard it is for outsiders to break into the game industry as a whole, let alone the tightly knit world of modding. And working on a public mod is one thing, but working behind the scenes on what is essentially going to be a sales pitch is something else entirely. Collins is vague about what mod-team members might receive as rewards if the idea sells to a publisher. He is also not offering any promises of employment or any sort of compensation, other than the possible opportunity to work on the full *Birthstar: Frontline* game if it eventually gets made.

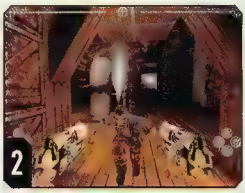
Even if there is no pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, the concept behind this project remains exciting. Marketing a game in this fashion is a brilliant idea, and it's one that we're bound to see more of in the future. A variation on this idea has actually already been successful. Frank DeLise created the Desert Combat total conversion with the help of volunteer modders, and this publicly available proof of concept eventually led to his Trauma Studios company being purchased by *Battlefield 1942* developer Digital Illusions. So there certainly isn't anything shady about what Collins is promoting.

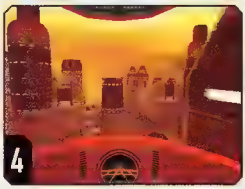
And let's face it, with development budgets skyrocketing and the competition for gaming dollars getting more intense with each new-release Tuesday, it's harder than ever to get a game from the design-doc stage to store shelves. Nobody wants to gamble $10 million on a start-up, or take a chance on any concept that strays outside accepted cookie-cutter formulas.

If *Birthstar: Frontline* is successful, it could spark off a new era of independent game design with indie-style ideas. Start-up developers could once more get the chance to take their ideas to the masses. And the entire mod community could be energized by the possibility that a volunteer effort could turn into the latest commercial game franchise. Collins may be shooting for the moon here, but his gamble is one on which all game lovers should be placing side bets.

MODSQUADS







1 DOOM is DØMED!1!!

Speaking of *DOOM*, you can now relive those thrilling days of yesteryear with Classic DOOM for *DOOM 3*. This mod, which is currently in a very playable Alpha 0.25 state (26MB), recreates the levels and attitude of the original *DOOM*. Currently, the idea is to remake the shareware levels of the legendary shooter, although developer Gazz says that his team is ready to go farther and re-do the entire original game, if they get a green light from id. Right now, Classic DOOM features levels E1M1, E1M3, and E1M4.

cdoom.d3files.com/index.php?page=news

2 Damn Them All to Hell!

Toss HBO's hit series *Deadwood* and *DOOM* into a blender and chances are you'll come up with something like Damnation. This Wild West-styled total conversion for *Unreal Tournament 2004* recently took home runner-up honors in Epic's million-dollar Make Something Unreal contest, but its gameplay is second to none. Development team Blue Omega has released what can best be described as a steampunk shooter in a cowboy hat. Single-player action is a blend between a conventional FPS and a third-person action-adventure like *Prince of Persia*, complete with jumps and puzzles. Three playable characters and a detailed storyline about a stereotypical Wild West robber baron even add a roleplaying feel.

damnationthegame.com

3 Carjacking With Friends

Occupy the hours before the release of *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* for the PC with version 0.5 (2.95MB) of Multi Theft Auto for *GTA III*. This multiplayer mod has come a long way over the past two years, progressing from a rudimentary, buggy experiment to a playable game with a built-in server browser. Version 0.5 adds stability, maps for Staunton Island and Shoreside Vale, and of course a little more of that unique *GTA* attitude and atmosphere to online deathmatching and racing. The only drawbacks are a couple of technical issues and the attitude of some players. You think Tommy Vercetti's a sociopath? There is also a version of the mod for *GTA: Vice City*, although it isn't nearly as polished. **mtavc.com**

4 The Circle is Now Complete

Civil war in the galaxy continues with the release of version 5 of the Galactic Conquest total conversion for *Battlefield 1942*. The latest edition of the popular Rebels vs. Imperials multiplayer game (885MB, but worth every byte) includes 23 maps, over a thousand custom art meshes, and almost 60 vehicles that run the gamut from Cloud City skycars to Jawa sandcrawlers to Imperial AT-ATs. Oh, and hats off to LucasArts for actively supporting the makers of Galactic Conquest, even in the wake of the company publishing its own multiplayer extravaganza in *Star Wars: Battlegrounds*. If only a certain comic-book publisher could be so free-thinking…. **galactic-conquest.net**

Second (Half) Life

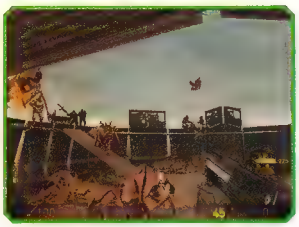
Play with Source-engine physics or kill armies of antlions, it's up to you with these mods for **Half-Life 2** BY BRETT TODD

So, you've finished *Half-Life 2* and don't quite know what to do with yourself. There's always the option of an immediate replay, but the battle for City 17 remains a little too fresh in your mind. Besides, as gripping as the story was, it was awfully linear in spots, and there are only so many lame headcrab jokes that the human mind can take in a limited period of time.

Why not try a mod? The Source engine modding community is really starting to spread its wings. While it's too early in the day for any ambitious total conversions (though plenty are in the works, like Twilight War, Dragonball: Adventures, The Trenches, Zombie Panic, and so on), scads of mods, solo and multiplayer maps, and nifty software toys that push the Source engine's physics envelope are already available at leading sites such as Half-Life 2 Files (halflife2.filefront.com) and Half-Life.net (halflife2.net).

See below for a rundown on all the hip and happening mods for *Half-Life 2* and its multiplayer mode, *Counter-Strike Source*.

Half-Life 2: Substance



Antlion Troopers SP Map

RomeoJGuy | halflife2.filefront.com

You get to play exterminator in this single-player map set in a Sahara Desert taken over by those nasty antlions. A Combine expeditionary force has been assigned the task of clearing the creatures out of the area. Gameplay is reminiscent of the action in *Starship Troopers*, with your Combine buddies defending a flimsy base against an assault from dozens of the big bugs. The resulting battle is crazy intense, which isn't entirely a good thing because the swarming insects are so numerous, they might just bring your framerate to a crawl.

Combine Onslaught SP Map

StiffyLS | home.neb.rr.com/thetoilet

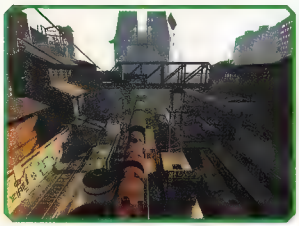
One of the rare quality solo maps for *Half-Life 2*, Combine Onslaught sees you and a few Rebel pals defending a house under siege against onrushing Combine forces. So StiffyLS's first map isn't the most innovative out there, but the onslaught is intense enough to provide plenty of fun for a half-hour or so every now and again.

Das Roboss

Tylak | tylak.com/dasroboss.html

Perhaps the most ambitious single-player mod out there right now in terms of gameplay, Tylak's Das Roboss strings three maps into a fantastic mini-campaign. In it, you have to invade an abandoned government

fallout shelter on the fringes of City 17 and prevent the Combine from finishing a new piece of military hardware codenamed Das Roboss. This metal monstrosity is said to make Striders look like Daddy Longlegs spiders, so it's imperative that you shut down the project right away. If any *Half-Life 2* solo map is a must-have, it's this one.



Depot DM Map

Brisck1 | fileplanet.com

Although currently still in beta, Brisck1's Depot deathmatch map includes some of the best architecture yet seen in a home-brewed *Half-Life 2* mod. As with much of the original game, however, Depot is pretty damn grungy, with a setting that could best be described as a ghetto trainyard after the apocalypse. Which it pretty much is. You can practically smell the burning tires as you're shooting your buddies.

Fusion Pack: Source for CSS

Games-Fusion | games-fusion.net

Games-Fusion, the creator of one of the most popular mod packs for the original *Counter-Strike*, is back with an update for the popular multiplayer game's successor. Fusion Pack: Source for *Counter-Strike Source* includes everything that fans loved about the first mod, including over a dozen realistic weapons and names, new terrorist and counter-terrorist models, extra sound effects for virtually everything that makes a peep in the game, and a revamped HUD and menu system.

Source Racer Mod

Source Racer Team | sourceracer.com

playable, although it doesn't incorporate planned power-ups like jump jets, mines, and

Half-Life 2: Substance

xdiesp | ludus1942.ngi.it/indice.html

A "remix" of the original *Half-Life 2* levels, HL2: Substance enhances the stock campaign with more action and more monsters. Developer xdiesp calls himself a major fan of the *Duke Nukem 3D* approach to first-person shooting, so he's reworked the Valve game as something of an ode to the guy who ran out of bubblegum in 1996. Major changes in the storyline contribute to the cranked-up carnage, too, including the rebellion beginning its offensive without you. Version 0.41 is 33MB, and includes 41 revamped levels, plus a new skinpack and a new soundpack.

Half-Life 2 Map-Packs

Half-Life 2 Files | halflife2.filefront.com

To keep things easy for downloaders, the moderators at Half-Life 2 Files have been putting together zipped compilations of the best and brightest solo and multiplayer *Half-Life 2* maps. At press time, four had been released, with each edition including 50 maps and clocking in at anywhere between 40MB and 90MB. Grab these files and you probably won't need to download too much else… although you'll also wind up with a lot of maps that you probably won't touch, so the "convenience" of these packs is always somewhat questionable.

HL2 CTF

Fried Okra Games | hl2ctf.com

There's more to multiplayer life than deathmatching and *Counter-Strike Source*. That must be the philosophy behind HL2 CTF, a Capture the Flag mod currently available in an alpha 0.61 version. As you might expect, the Fried Okra Games project pits the Rebels versus the Combine in an all-out scrap for control of two snazzy banners. As you might not expect, gameplay is incredibly speedy and the popular gravity gun has been dropped to keep matches from becoming unbalanced. The first beta version was due out just after we went to press,

however, so you can expect some tweaking as work on the mod progresses.

HL2 Physics SP Map

ThAtSgOtTaHuRt | halflife2.filefront.com

Combine this map with Garry's Mod and you've got the perfect showcase for all of the wild and woolly stunts that are possible with the Source engine. Designer ThAtSgOtTaHuRt has put together a series of rooms where you can spawn monsters and objects, play around with different light and fire effects, and mess with blood, sparks, steam, and more. You can have a blast with the gravity gun in this map.

McDonald's CSS Map

Mds31781 | www.k-files.de

Grimace would not be impressed. Mds31781 has created a deathmatch map for *Counter-Strike Source* that is set in and around a suburban McDonald's. The fast-food joint is recreated in all its typical garish splendor, with the golden arches and the usual red-and-yellow color scheme outdoors, and placards of Ronald and his pals indoors. Get the map now, before lawyers have it pulled off the web.

Pilotable Strider Mini-Mod

TheQuartz | strider.hl2spain.com

Now this mod you could see coming a mile away. TheQuartz's Pilotable Strider Mini-Mod is something of a dream come true for everyone who struggled to vanquish those tall, tripod monstrosities in City 17. Now you can turn the tables and use the Combine's most devastating weapon against it, or set up battles of the titans that are Godzillean in scope. The most up-to-date version, numbered 0.2.75, fixes a number of bugs from the first release, enhances the responsiveness of the third-person camera, and adds support for driving additional vehicles like the helicopter gunship and armored personnel carrier. You can even take the, um, wheel of an antlion guard.

Garry's Mod

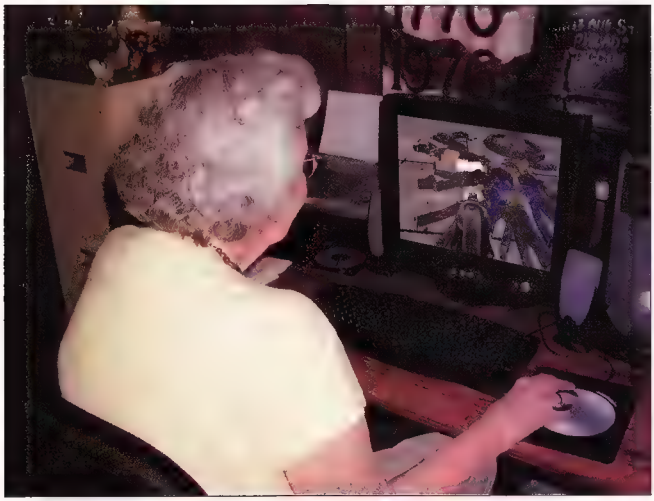
Garry Newman | garry.tv/garrysmod

Do you like physics? Well, do ya, punk? Garry Newman does, and he's put his money where his mouth is with the not-so-imaginatively named Garry's Mod. The 3.5MB software toy, which comes in flavors for both *Half-Life 2* and *Counter-Strike Source*, demonstrates both the incredible flexibility of the Source engine and Newman's incredibly goofy sense of humor. Not too many other mods out there allow you to send objects airborne with the attachment of helium balloons, warp facial expressions like a blowtorch in a wax museum, launch watermelons at walls, and even pose ragdolls in whatever compromising position you can concoct. So if you ever wanted to stage sexual acts between Gordon and Alyx in the back of a wagon floating above City 17, now's your chance.

Revolters 1.2 TDM Double Pack

MoonQuake | halflife2.filefront.com

This second version of MoonQuake's popular team-deathmatch mod Revolters features two maps with different objectives for the Rebel and Combine sides. Each uses the same map architecture, although alterations like the Rebels needing to destroy Combine generators in version A and the Combine holding Alyx hostage in version B ensure enough variety that the maps play quite differently. Also, there are a fair number of servers currently running the Revolters pack, so you should be able to find a game whether you're in North America or Europe.



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Indie City

By Gregory Micek

The Debate Spills Over

Even in the world of indies, developers battle publishers

At last year's Indie Games Conference (indiegamescon.com) there was a brief but strangely familiar, exchange between a developer and a publisher representative. During a publisher heavy panel discussion on the state of casual games, Phil Carlisle of *Worms* fame (now with ScaryHead.com) asked: "You point fingers at the retail industry and say how broken it is, but then you want to bring the same problems to the online space, how are you making things better for indies?"

"As with most things in life, it comes down to pure economics."

The answer, courtesy of Oberon Media's Dave Nixon, was short and sweet:

"Hey, at least you still get royalties."

Not surprisingly, the other publisher representatives nodded in agreement while the audience reeled back in horror. And thus, many an unsuspecting developer was introduced to some of the harsher realities of indie game development.

While most indie developers harbor little hope or interest in landing a deal with publishing giants such as EA or UbiSoft, they do see the benefit of having someone with deep pockets in their corner. Enter the likes of Oberon Media, RealOne Arcade, and Shockwave.com. Although these outlets offer partial, and sometimes full, funding of a game's development, most developers turn to them to get their game in front of the millions of gamers these sites have the power to attract. The non-exclusive publishing agreements these portals offer enable developers to shop their games around in search of the best sales.

All of this sounds great for the developer, doesn't it? So what's the source of Carlisle's concern, and why would Oberon's man snap back with such a blunt response?

As with most things in life, it comes down to pure economics. For example, lets say Carlisle and his partner at ScaryHead.com put the finishing touches on their first game and begin selling it through their website. If they're like most indies, they'll spend a few hundred dollars on website advertising and press releases, and countless hours trying to get magazines and websites to review the game. Assuming their game is a moderate success they'll most likely sell between 100 and 200 copies a month. At $20 a pop, things look OK. The game won't sell itself though, and splitting time between supporting their existing product and working on the next game will soon become tiresome. So the portals step in.

If Phil agrees to sell ScaryHead's game through one of the large portals, it's very possible to see sales go from a couple hundred a month to 300 or more day. Do the math—it's an impressive figure for two guys who do it themselves. Not only that, but the portal will take care of all the advertising and legwork involved in getting the game in front of people. Since the portal is doing so much promotional work, it's going to keep a sizable percentage of the profits. Not two years ago, Carlisle could expect to give up 50% of the profits to the portal. While it may seem like a big piece of the pie, if you consider the size of the pie it still sounds like a great deal.

Fast forward a couple years to the case of a developer who wishes to remain anonymous. He inks a deal with a leading game portal to sell his above-average puzzle game, accepting the fact that they're now taking 80% of the profits these days. Due to the proprietary delivery system the portal uses, he spends time working on a special version, and during this process he's required to remove all mention of his game studio from within the game and replace them with the portals'. Once the portal launches, the sales skyrocket and it finds its way to the Top 10 on the portal's front page.

After selling over 250 copies a day for a couple weeks, the game drops off the Top 10, and things come grinding to a halt. Now, his game is only selling 3-4 copies a week. Not long after this, the portal introduces a program where gamers can effectively purchase the game for less than $5. While Mr. Anonymous still sells his game through his own website, a quick Google search reveals that the portal's mention of his game buries his website back several pages.

As overly dramatic as Mr. Anonymous' situation sounds, it's becoming more common as larger numbers of people look for alternatives to boxed games. While there are other publishers, such as Garage Games, that offer much more developer-friendly deals, they have yet to reach the scope of the industry leaders. And so, the Developer vs. Publisher battle makes its way into the indie gaming world. ■

SPOTLIGHT

Now that you've been guilt ridden over the current state some developers find themselves in, here's a few recent releases well worth taking a look at:

AirStrike 2: Gulf Thunder

Divo Games divogames.com

Once again proving that being an indie developer doesn't mean you're all about innovation, Divo Games gives us *AirStrike 2: Gulf Thunder*, the third game in its shooter series. Everything good from the previous versions of the game is still here, from the colorfully rendered graphics to the continuous onslaught of enemies. There's plenty of units to take out using a wide range of weapons, but the game's brief length (only 15 levels) will tempt some to wait for a sort of gold pack feature of all the *AirStrike* titles, even though fans of the series will feel right at home.

Just shoot everything, it's less confusing that way.

Jets 'n' Guns

Rake In Grass rakeingrass.com

Shooters (shmups) were once a mainstay of the console world, and certainly made some admirable inroads onto the PC. For one reason or another they're almost nowhere to be found these days, unless you go indie that is. *Jets 'n' Guns* continues the classic shmup tradition, delivering an absurd amount of firepower, tons of enemies, and frantic gameplay that will bring you back into the 20th century. The graphics are impressive, and feature all of the over-the-top explosions you expect from a game like this. A surprisingly deep ship-customization system adds to the overall package, and makes the game enjoyable long after you've played through all 21 levels.

Battalion

Urban Squall urbansquall.com

Battalion is best described as a web-based version of *Advance Wars*. If that doesn't send you rushing to the website, nothing will. Getting into this turn-based strategy game is extremely simple; go to the website, create a login, and begin playing. There's no software to download, no subscription to purchase (it's optional), and it has a very forgiving learning curve. The graphics pale in comparison to the other titles mentioned this month, but they're effective enough so you always know who is who and what your various units are, something that is particularly useful during large-scale battles. The game's price tag is tough to beat, but if you insist on paying for everything, you can subscribe to the premium service, which unlocks many more maps and allows for more unit customization.

Don't spread your forces too thin or you'll be in a world of hurt.

Mars Attacks!

Look, up in the sky! It's a bird, it's a pla–BZZZZZ… WAAATTTTT! …SIZZLE… it's **Destroy All Humans!**

BY TOM CHICK

Developer Pandemic **Publisher** THQ
Platforms PS2, Xbox **Release Date** Summer 2005

Cameron Brown picks up a police car with his mind and shoves it at a bunch of people sitting around a poolside table. Then he runs up and fries them with the electric blue beam from his Zap-O-Matic. Then he rips their brains out. They come loose with a wet pop and a splash. All the while, people around him are shrieking and running. He is, after all, a little grey alien with big eyes, sharp teeth, a ray gun, and the keys to a bad ass flying saucer.

He hops into the saucer and slashes a death ray back and forth across a bright pink motel. It burns and collapses. Then the army tanks start rolling in. He burns them, too, and lifts one into the sky with the saucer's Abducto Beam, which dangles it by an invisible energy tether. A little circular motion of the saucer gets the burning tank whipping around like a swing on a carnival ride. He lets loose at the right moment and it goes flying out to the horizon.

The official Jerry Bruckheimer/Michael Bay pose. Cue the guitar solo.

Ask not what your ET can do for you

"You also get to act out all your repressed alien fantasies about mind control and probing," Brown says in his human form. As an invader from the stars, he can take on the form of living creatures, suck out their thoughts, or hypnotize them to bend them to his will. In one mission, shortly after laying waste to a small farming community and a county fair, he has to mind control the mayor and use him to deliver a speech that will placate the community. Choosing from a list of statements, he takes the heat off his back by whipping the crowd into an anti-Communist frenzy.

> **"You get to act out all your repressed alien fantasies about mind control and probing."**–CAMERON BROWN

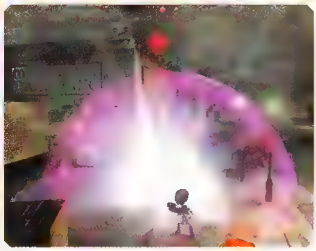
Brown is a producer at Pandemic, where it's developing *Destroy All Humans*, an upcoming game about destroying all humans. The eponymous imperative is taken to heart by the Furons, who are basically feral grays. They're more *Mars Attacks* than *Close Encounters*, visiting America in the bright naïve Communist-hating, Elvis-loving '50s. And while the aliens have a sleek, contemporary design, the world they're visiting has an Ed Wood vibe, like something from a grade-B (or lower) sci-fi movie. *Destroy All Humans* is steeped in this approach, from the Theremin in the background during the opening screen all the way to the unlockable bonus content, which includes *Teenagers from Outer Space* and excerpts from *Plan 9 from Outer Space*.

Where do you want to invade today?

From your mother ship, you choose an invasion site. Each of the five sites is basically a small area set up with a mission. These start out as things like "Scan the cows' thoughts," "Throw the police cars into the water," "Kidnap Miss Rockwell and take her to your spaceship," or "Carve crop circles to set up a landing signal." You eventually progress to more ambitious undertakings, like "Destroy the entire city."

Once you've finished a mission, there's an element of sandbox gameplay in that you can always revisit an invasion site to search for collectibles, play bonus minigames, or just terrorize the populace and collect more brains. But the invasion sites are relatively small, especially since you can hop into your flying saucer at any time and fly around (there's only one place on the map where you can land, however, so your transitions from flying to walking are limited). If you bump into the edge of the world, you'll get a reprimand from your boss alien and you'll be turned back. On foot, you have a limited jet pack that will let you reach rooftops. In one mission, you have to destroy everyone's television reception by breaking their antennas, what with it being the days before cable.

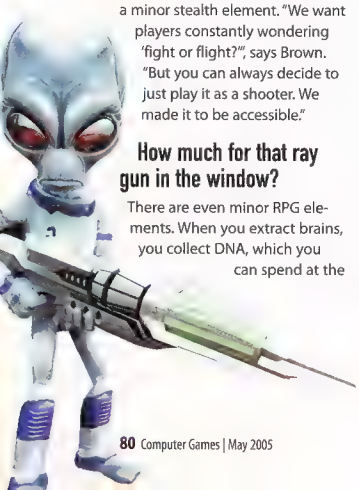
Terrorizing beauty contestants and cows while destroying everything in sight. How can this not be fun?



The aliens are coming!

As you play, the way humans react to you is determined by an alert level, akin to *Grand Theft Auto's* wanted level. At first, people scream and run away. They tend to yell out things about a "little green man" (much to your chagrin since you're not, in fact, green). If you don't lay low, the cops come, followed by the military. Eventually, the G-Men show up, followed by elite troops in powered armor, toting EMP weapons that'll disable your alien toys.

Wearing a human disguise will keep people from freaking out, but cops can see through the disguise. They show up on your radar as little red dots, which gives the game a minor stealth element. "We want players constantly wondering 'fight or flight?'", says Brown. "But you can always decide to just play it as a shooter. We made it to be accessible."



How much for that ray gun in the window?

There are even minor RPG elements. When you extract brains, you collect DNA, which you can spend at the mother ship to upgrade your alien and your flying saucer. You'll eventually get better weapons, like the Disintegrator Ray that freezes victims in mid-stride and dissolves them, or an Ion Detonator that works like a grenade launcher, with an option for timed or manual detonation. You can outfit your UFO with a Sonic Boom, which Brown calls "a pure physics weapon," or a Quanto-Deconstructor, which makes it easy to finish those missions where you have to level an entire city.

One of your most powerful toys is your big, fat overdeveloped brain, which has psychokinetic powers. Press a button to lift your target into the air. You can then move it around with the analog stick, pounding it into the ground, gently setting it down, or flinging it away as hard as you can. Your lifting power is determined by your level of concentration, which is like mana you can replenish by sucking out people's thoughts.

This is where Pandemic's licensing of the Havoc engine and its ragdoll physics most vividly comes into play. "Here's a world's first for you," Brown says, lifting a cow and giving it a jiggle. "No other game has ever had ragdoll udders."

Dance like everyone's watching

Your overdeveloped brain also gives you the power of hypnosis. You can grab a human and give him your choice from a set of commands: follow you, go to the saucer, or cause a distraction. The latter will gather other humans around while the victim does something odd, like dance wildly. You can even get cows to dance. This will bring bystanders around so you can go about your insidious business nearby and remain unobserved.

And then there's the anal probe. "It's kind of a melee weapon," Brown admits.

Although *Destroy All Humans* has a clearly tongue-in-cheek approach, it also has a very grim sense of humor. Pandemic has had to make some compromises to avoid an M rating. What used to be arterial spray has been reduced to something like *Medal of Honor's* dust puffs. In the current build, sucking someone's brain out causes a little green splash that was probably red at some point. It's possible to set people on fire, since there are gas stations everywhere and the suburbs are loaded with little propane tanks for their barbecues. In earlier builds, a burning man would run around screaming, bumping into other people, and setting them on fire. Rated M, said the ESRB. Pandemic made the fire less realistic and turned off the ability for burning people to catch non-burning people on fire. Rated T, said the ESRB.

You'd almost think they'd been influenced somehow, maybe mind controlled, to make the harsh realities of alien destruction seem more palatable. If between now and the game's release, the title is changed to *We Come in Peace*, maybe a cop should investigate. ■

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Jade Empire

Get your Chi on

Developer Bioware **Publisher** Microsoft
Release Date April 2005

It's like: Crouching Tiger, Hidden Attribute Points

The Buzz: In *Jade Empire*, you're a martial arts master in a land based on the legends of ancient China. You take part in an epic story traveling to exotic locales while gathering a group of followers to fight for good or evil. So far, it's what you'd expect from a Bioware role-playing game, but this isn't *Knights of the Old Republic Go to Ancient China*.

NPC Dawn Star takes a[illegible] magic to [illegible] some dying by [illegible]

The biggest difference between *Jade Empire* and previous Bioware games is that combat happens in real time. You don't set characters on auto-attack and then direct battles from a pause screen. Instead, every punch, kick, fireball, and swing of a ham (that's right) is a direct result of controller input. Your character will have access to over 30 fighting styles that you can change between with a press of the d-pad. Success in battle depends on dexterity and tactical decisions about which combination of styles will be most effective against your opponent.

"The real-time combat in *Jade Empire* is designed to be accessible and fun," says Bioware co-CEO Greg Zeschuk. "It will appeal to both action and RPG fans. For each fighting style, there are four basic moves: fast attack, power attack, block, and a clearing move. This will allow players to learn a consistent control scheme for all styles in the game. To add depth to the combat, players can use lots of cool strategy: you can power-up your attacks using Chi charges, slow down your opponents using Focus mode, and combine fighting styles to create powerful harmonic combos."

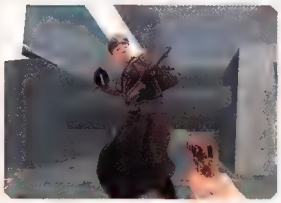
Fighting styles range from hand-to-hand combat like Leaping Tiger, with its quick strikes and high jumping attacks, to the ground-shaking magic of Stone Immortal. There are also weapon styles like Double Axes and transformation styles such as

Horse Demon that quickly drain Force—er, Chi—but provide you with some very powerful attacks. A harmonic combo results when you string together attacks from two styles. For example, encase the enemy in a block of ice using Ice Shard, and follow up with a White Demon backhand to shatter him, *Terminator 2*-style. You can learn new styles by defeating certain enemies or completing optional quests, and others are available depending on whether you choose to follow the Way of the Open Palm, or the Way of the Closed Fist.

Open Palm and Closed Fist are essentially *Jade Empire*'s Light and Dark sides of the Force, though their ties to good and evil are slightly more ambiguous. Closed Fist is about gaining power regardless of the consequences, and is more likely to attract the bad guys. Open Palm, on the other hand, is about self-sacrifice for the good of the community. As in *Knights of the Old Republic*, alignment is based on choices you make during conversations with NPCs.

Character creation is a simple process. Right off the bat, you'll have seven premade characters available if you want to jump right into the game, or you can customize them to suit your preferences. For instance, Wu the Lotus Blossum is a balanced character who can use weapons or magic with equal skill; however, you could turn her into a hard-hitting brawler, if you choose. You'll be given points to assign to the three primary attributes of Body, Mind, and Spirit. These attributes determine which options will be available to you in conversation, and are directly related to your starting scores in the secondary attributes: Health (hit points), Focus (the amount of time you can spend in Focus Mode), and Chi (magic points). As you gain experience, you can assign new points directly toward primary or secondary attributes.

"*Jade Empire* will have tons of replayability because of the multiple different endings and differing quest progressions, which also vary depending on your alignment choices," says Dr. Ray Muzyka, co-founder of Bioware. "Further replayability comes from the fact that combat plays very differently depending on what styles you have learned, and the variety of different followers you can bring with you in your travels." Gamers can choose whether or not to follow in April, when *Jade Empire* will mysteriously appear on shelves. **–Mike Cathcart**



Medal of Honor: European Assault

Developer/Publisher Electronic Arts
Platforms Gamecube, PS2, Xbox
Release Date Spring 2005

The new *Medal of Honor* doesn't just have a better engine (now with support for 70 characters on screen, up from the last game's 15), it's got a whole new approach to gameplay. The levels are wide open and non-linear, with multiple paths to the end. And now there's a sort of adrenaline meter you can fill by doing heroic things. When it's full, you can toggle a bullet-time mode: the world goes slo-mo, you're invulnerable, your ammo is unlimited, and you have one-shot kills. Electronic Arts is obviously struggling to fit this in with the series' historical context, but the idea is clear: This is not your father's *Medal of Honor*.

Darkwatch

Developer Sammy Studios **Publisher** Sega
Platforms Xbox, PS2 **Release Date** May 2005

If you can't have pirate ninjas, how about undead cowboys? The western horror theme in *Darkwatch* lends the shooting a vividly imagined world with some distinctive gameplay elements. (Fan the hammer of your revolver for rapid fire! Ride a horse to catch up with the train.) You can pick whether you want your vampire cowboy to wear a white hat or a black hat, as it were, by choosing the good or evil option at pre-set points; each option gives you a unique power for the rest of the game. So, while the obvious attraction is the over-the-top zombie shooting, which includes dismemberment and rag doll physics, you'll get to ponder some ethical dilemmas along the way.

Dead to Rights II: Hell to Pay

Developer/Publisher Namco **Platform** PS2
Release Date April 2005

Dead to Rights is a less gritty, more cartoonish take on the basic action you got in *Max Payne*, complete with the third-person perspective, bullet time, and two-fisted pistoling. The sequel doesn't seem like it's going to be terribly different, with the exception of a bigger role for Shadow, your character's dog. He can be called in more often to dispatch bad guys and fetch their ammo.

Haunting Ground

Developer/Publisher Capcom **Platform** PS2
Release Date May 2005

Man's best friend is also featured prominently in *Haunting Ground*, where the lead character is a young girl disinclined to the zombie bashing common in most horror games. Instead, she sics Hewie on them. That's right, she named it "Hewie." The dogs in both this and *Dead to Rights* are played by a white German Shepherd, which makes you wonder where the trend started. The answer: last January's *Resident Evil 4*, which also featured the same dog lending a helping paw.

our man in Japan

by Shou Suzuki

What a DraQue!

Exploring the very Japanese RPG Dragon Quest VIII

Dragon Quest VIII is the latest installment from console RPGs' original child. In two weeks, it became Japan's best-selling PlayStation 2 game ever. Most gamers in America couldn't care less. Why the disparate viewpoints?

Dragon Quest, or *DraQue*, is like a sculpture. The sculptor in this case is Yuji Hori, a former wordsmith who is now a game-smith. He has an unquenchable admiration for the tradition of old-school RPGs, tied seamlessly with a reverence for Japan's past. His games are awash in the cadence of a slightly archaic language, when the country's culture consisted of a collection of segregated mountain and coastline villages, ultimately isolated from one another. Towns in *DraQue* are oases of charm brimming with this context, yet mixed with the myths of Western and Eastern fantasy.

Characters speak a delightful and charismatic Hori-brand dialogue. But it's hard to translate, with its attention to things like idiomatic references to Japan's old oil traders, the sound of *re* (pronounced RAY) to Japanese ears, or the skilled use of the feel of native Japanese adjectives with their lax, smiley pronunciations, as opposed to the hard and specific meaning of words derived from Chinese pronunciation. It remains an enigma why a videogame—and one that's not even particularly focused on plot—seems harder to translate than a haiku.

Visuals are understood through the eyes of comic artist Akira Toriyama, whose cartoons even lend the game's serious moments a leering wink. Enemies in *DraQue* will be suspended off balloons to shoot arrows or perform puppet plays to catch you off guard. There are sea princesses made of seaweed who invite a line of dancing squid to come to battle, and seashells that may forget to fight, losing themselves by scribbling in the sand. The word for this in Japan is *manga*, that medium used to illustrate or enumerate thoughts considered too random, spontaneous, and ephemeral for other arts. This is all surrounded by musician Koichi Sugiyama's giggling, fleeting compositions, which tend to be lush, string-heavy, complex pieces of classic symphony. They are entirely unlike the classical style used in other games, which might be more comparable to movie orchestration. The experience is something like playing a Looney Tunes version of *Treasure Island* while listening to Wagner, all set in an excessively Asian version of the Shire.

The gamey parts revolve around crafting something beautiful with traditional ingredients. Unfortunately, *DraQue* can only be played on its own very strict terms. That means Hori accepts any compromise in graphics for speediness. And only God can save your game at the town's church, while save files are "adventure books" that record your confessions. Sound effects are intentionally brought out of the vault of the mid-'80s, dungeons are hair-pulling affairs of strategy and insight into all your resources, and random battles form a cornerstone from which everything builds. The only real modernity is a stunning 3D overworld that is so huge and meticulously realized that the game's dungeons often melt convincingly into its landscape. Banking your ship at the stream of a waterfall, then walking through the autumn trees lining that bubbling river to the high ridges of a mountain castle has seldom been more compelling.

> **"It remains an enigma why a videogame seems harder to translate than a haiku."**

Nevertheless, *DraQue* may seem overly simple at first. While new elements include taming certain monsters into battle teams, combining items to create new ones, and a growth system involving distribution of points between fighting disciplines, these are much simpler than you would find in comparable mechanics of other games. The trick then is Hori's subtle hand expanding every last detail into an RPG of immense depth.

Winning a *DraQue* game is only the beginning. Afterwards comes *yarikomi* or the Japanese word for replaying a game and taking certain parts to extreme levels. Here the game's flexibility, challenge, and exploration constantly motivate engaged players to create their own role-playing games within the game. You can't rewrite the careful details of Yuji Hori's adventure books; you simply retranslate and reinterpret them in many ways. And the realization of just how much that role-playing can vary in his peculiar world is awesome. ■

CHIPS & BITS

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Toy Faire

Timesplitters: Future Perfect gives you everything and the kitchen sink

BY TOM CHICK

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Genre First-person Plethora **Developer** Free Radical **Publisher** Electronic Arts **ESRB** Mature **Platforms** Gamecube, PS2, Xbox

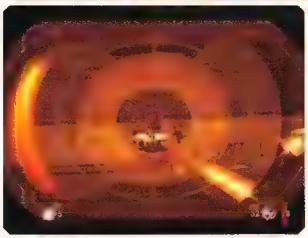
Computer Games EDITOR'S CHOICE

It seems like only yesterday that people were saying, "You can't do first-person shooters on a console." Since *Halo*, they don't really say that anymore. But even back when they did say it, they'd add, "...except for *Goldeneye*," referencing Rare's 1997 James Bond shooter, which had gameplay, AI, character animation, and multiplayer support (splitscreen, natch) rivaling anything you'd find on a PC.

So it's heartening to see the guys who made *Goldeneye* still going strong with the *Timesplitters* series, which is now in its third iteration and shows no sign of running out of steam. *Halo* gets all the attention, but *Future Perfect* is every bit as good. Whereas *Halo* has incredible depth, *Timesplitters* opts for breadth. This is the *Unreal Tournament 2004* of console shooters, taking an everything-and-the-kitchen-sink approach: a story, skirmishes against bots, challenges, unlockables, a mapmaker, online support, and scads of weapons. The artwork is borderline schizophrenic, with zombie-hunting horror levels, sci-fi robot wars, Vietnam, hip *NOLF*-ish Cold War settings, and Jules Verne-y cities.

What's new this time is a more cohesive plot, which is remarkably smart and funny considering that it's ultimately superfluous. After all, do you really need an excuse to go from shooting-up a Scottish castle in 1924 to a *Terminator*-style resistance against robot overlords in the 25th Century? But *Timesplitters* provides more clever dialogue and effective humor than you'll find in a typical action film.

For instance, a ladder descends into a pit with the sound of growling monsters coming up from the darkness. "Looks dangerous," the heroine quips, "You go first." This is where most cutscenes end. But then there's a quick shot, from the hero's POV, of her miniskirt. "Okay," he volunteers. The story also has some shrewd "go back in time and play with yourself" gimmicks, most of them notable for the dialogue. "Yeah, I hated having to do that part," your future self tells your current self while you're struggling with a mildly annoying puzzle during a boss battle. Your Vin Diesel look-a-like avatar is played with just enough self-deprecation to



Setting zombies on fire? Check. Sniper rifle? Check. Jesse Ventura-style minigun? Check.

be endearing. And unlike the previous games, there are no brick walls of difficulty; the action keeps moving until the end, which comes fairly quickly.

But the majority of *Future Perfect* is the stuff besides the story. You can set up matches with any mix of bots and humans; even as a solo game there's an awful lot of deathmatching, capturing the flag, assault mode-ing, and so forth, thanks to solid bot AI and a staggering amount of variety. There are dozens of settings for what weapons to use, how smart the bots should be, and how the game should play. *Timesplitters* is limber almost to a fault. You're liable to miss the impact of simple twists, like giving everyone proximity mines as a default weapon, swapping in a mag rifle that can shoot through walls, or adding monkeys who will hunt down the guy in first place. There's even a streamlined map maker that lets you assemble your own maps from pre-set tiles.

There's a challenge mode with little minigames that range from charming, to aggravating, to just plain weird. Break everything by throwing bricks? Check. Cat racing? Check. Electric monkey dancing? It's in there. There's also a league mode, which lets you work your way up through a series of pre-set matches. And all the while, you're unlocking stuff. Well, mostly character models, but there are occasional cheat codes and weapons thrown into the mix to give you an incentive to try everything.

All told, there are about thirty weapons in here, but they're made manageable by the fact that any given match uses only six at a time. Some of them are shamelessly borrowed, such as a gravity gun from *Half-Life 2*, and a stake gun straight out of *Painkiller*, both of which are turning into clichés before they're even a year old. But *Timesplitters* isn't about being original; it's about being complete. It's about taking everything you could want in a shooter, as well as some things you didn't even know you wanted, and putting them into a ridiculously overgenerous toybox of a game. Although it's debatable whether any other console shooters are better, you're not going to find one this comprehensive. ■

Phantom Dust

Computer Games EDITOR'S CHOICE

★ ★ ★ ★ ½

Genre Slapjack-paced CCG Action
Developer Microsoft Japan **Publisher** Majesco
ESRB Teen **Platform** Xbox

Leave it to the Japanese to come up with something as unique as this brilliant combination of strategy and action. There's a surprisingly deep spell system here, obviously inspired by collectible card games like *Magic the Gathering*, but not in a glib "Hey, kids love *Magic*!" way. It's a thoughtful and complex deck-building scheme that dovetails neatly into a fast-paced, third-person action shooter where you play the spells you're dealt. Imagine a game of *Jedi Knight* with the guns turned off so everyone's slinging force powers, paralyzing and smacking each other, whipping out lighting and fireballs, throwing up rock walls and mirror shields, knocking over pillars and collapsing bridges in the process.

And leave it to the Japanese to clog up a perfectly good game with a bunch of anime and JRPG conventions. This is essentially a multiplayer game, but you're forced to slog through the single-player stuff to earn your cards. But for strategy or CCG players who are up to the twitch factor, it's more than worth the trouble. **–Tom Chick**

And here's the wind up... and the spell... it's a Psycho Spear!

NBA Street V3

You, me, and LeBron James by the schoolyard

★ ★ ★ ½

Genre Street Basketball
Developer/Publisher EA Sports **ESRB** Everyone
Platforms Xbox, PS2, GameCube

Blacktop basketball is back in *NBA Street V3*. And it looks a lot like it did in volumes one and two, with the same three-on-three stylings that arcade b-ballers have been enjoying since 2002. Although enhanced controls and spectacular stunts make this the best release in franchise history, it's more of the same.

Street Challenge remains the heart of play. This solo mode is identical its predecessors, with the focus remaining on a nobody touring schoolyards from coast to coast. NBA stars like Vince Carter and Baron Davis stand between you and street-ball immortality, however, so you've got to win dozens of showdowns to prove you've got game.

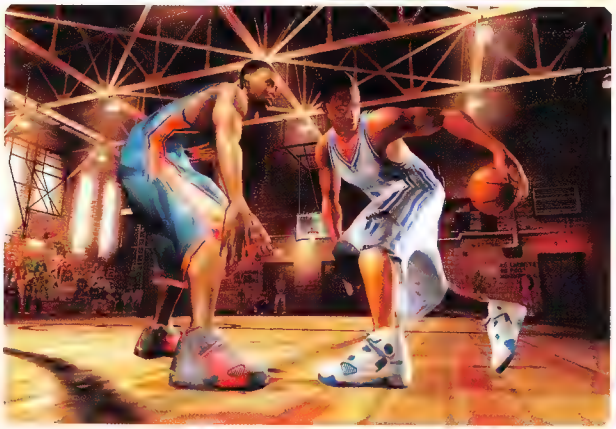
Headlining the additions this year is the Trick Stick. *NBA Street V3* is the latest EA Sports title to use the right analog stick to pull off combos that turn basketball stars into superheroes. Some dribbles require Plastic Man stretches, a few shots bend the laws of physics, and the spine-twisting "Roll Out" move is straight from a limbo competition.

Acrobatics are your reward for stringing together moves. Max-out the Gamebreaker bar and your feats become more Cirque du Soleil than Dr. J. Get good enough with the Trick Stick and you can even stage sensational three-man jams where you sail above the backboard and dish off to both teammates in mid-air before the dunk.

Online play for the Xbox and PS2 (the net-challenged GameCube gets a team of Nintendo characters, led by Super Mario, as compensation) is the other big plus, along with customization options. You can craft players down to their high-tops, and the court editor allows you to give your alter-ego a custom arena on which to show off his skills.

Yet even with added b-ball bombastics, *NBA Street V3* underlines the biggest weakness of sports game franchises—the sports don't change enough to warrant new releases every 12 months. Trick Stick and online play or not, this is the third time that an *NBA Street* game has hit stores in as many years, and the formula is a little stale. **–Brett Todd**

[right] Kobe to the hoop, yo, and not a prosecutor in sight. [below] T-Mac dribbles. Someone get the cleanup crew.



Gran Turismo 4

Ohh, I like that blue car. I think I'll buy one.

★ ★ ★

Genre CarPG **Developer** Polyphony Digital
Publisher Sony **ESRB** Everyone **Platform** PS2

The *Gran Turismo* series has finally come clean and admitted that it's not about racing, or even driving. The whole point is to cater to your fetishistic impulse to just have cars, and maybe tinker with them a bit, too. So *Gran Turismo 4* has added something called "director's mode," in which you don't even have to drive, allowing you to admire your car full-time while the computer drives it. There's even a slightly creepy photoshoot mode, where you carefully position your car and lovingly take pictures of it.

This director's mode takes all the work out of earning money, unlocking tracks, and winning new cars. What's more, you don't have to deal with the bad AI, cars that are impervious to damage, and pinball physics that make it easier to bounce off something than avoid it. Now you just sit back, watch your car win some races, buy better cars, and watch them win more races. And when you feel like it, you can take your turn at the wheel. If you want. Or not. It's up to you.

Although *Gran Turismo 4* is missing a lot of what makes for a good racing sim, or even a passable driving game, it does have its own compulsive "check out all these cars I have!" sensibility. On one hand, it's a shame that the developers haven't seen fit to add a damage model or online support—even the split screen multiplayer is dull and perfunctory. But on the other hand, this is the quintessential CarPG, brimming with shiny graphics, real-world branding, and a sense that you can make it as challenging or easy as you want. In the end,

Ninj-O-Rama

The ultimate showdown: **Red Ninja** takes on **Tenchu: Fatal Shadows**

Red Ninja: End of Honor ★ ★ ★

Genre Stealthish Action **Developer** Tranji **Publisher** Vivendi Universal Games
ESRB Mature **Platforms** PS2, Xbox

Tenchu: Fatal Shadows ★ ★ ½

Genre Actionish Stealth **Developer** K2 / FromSoftware **Publisher** Sega **ESRB** Mature **Platform** PS2

Ninjas were so hot in the '80s. Then, *Ninja III: The Domination* came along and tested the American waters of how we would react, as a nation, to lady ninjas by making the lady ninja not an actual ninja but just a pretty girl working in retail, one who gets possessed by a ninja. The ninja craze sort of died down after that… well, human ninjas anyway. Especially along the lady ninja front.

But now lady ninjas—real ones even—are back, in game form, with *Red Ninja* and the latest installment of *Tenchu*. The latter gets the drop on the former by releasing first, and by featuring two ladies, the returning Ayame, and a new character, Rin. *Red Ninja's* Kurenai, however, is more appealing than either of them. Both games are set in feudal Japan, but Kurenai wears a nice period costume that shows a lot of leg, while the *Tenchu* Two wear outfits that have inexplicably modern tailoring that show a lot of leg.

Red Ninja also wins on the storyline front, with a tale of a stolen 1500's version of a Gatling gun, compared to *Tenchu's* standard slaughtered village impetus. *Red Ninja* wins on most counts really, bringing some *Prince of Persia*-style moves, seduction of guards, and Kurenai's wire weapon to the table, while *Tenchu* is more or less the same as previous installments in the series. *Red Ninja* has much more emphasis on action and acrobatics.

The big sticking point with both, however, is the awful behavior of the camera.

[top] In Tenchu: Fatal Shadows, only the cunning of the ninja can save feudal Japan from the menace of the half-naked elderly. [bottom] In Red Ninja, only the cunning of the ninja can save feudal Japan from the menace of the guy who gets cut in two.

Tenchu's is just unwieldy, while *Red Ninja's* seems to have been designed first to give you a perfect flash of Kurenai's panties when she enters a crawlspace and to hell with how it behaves otherwise. If not for that, *Red Ninja* would be a much better game. **–Matthew Gallant**

it's about exactly as futile and gratifying as a massively multiplayer online RPG, only instead of filling an experience bar, you're filling a garage. **–Tom Chick**

Dai Senryaku VII

Big tactics for the big console

★ ★ ★ ½

Genre Hexfest **Developer** Kool Kizz
Publisher Kemco **ESRB** Teen **Platform** Xbox

Dai Senryaku VII (Japanese for "big tactics") takes the position of premiere turn-based military strategy game for the Xbox. A mean feat, to be sure, given that the position was vacant. But there's a decent game to be had here for both PC generals and vets of the GBA's *Advance Wars* looking for something a little... bigger.

Bigger, but not wholly better, that is. *DSVII* will seem familiar to the PC crowd, with its hex-based maps and heaps of units, each with its own accompanying heap of stats. But for fans of *Advance Wars'* balance of depth and simplicity, does being able to produce a variety of units based on the real-world modern American, European, Chinese, and Russian designs afford an additional depth of gameplay that is worth the added complexity? When the game's math is done, deciding whether to produce a Leopard 2A5 or a Leopard 2A6 as your army's Main Battle Tank isn't a critical decision.

But the variety of units and terrain—combined with spacious 3D maps with a free-floating camera that offers perspective views of the terrain—provides for an open-ended battle. The game's campaign mode missions don't fall into the design trap of being puzzle missions that force you to figure out the way you're intended to finish the battle. However, they aren't very coherent as a campaign, either.

Add in quite a few fit-and-finish issues—like bare bones battle animations, too-small

In the land of the hex, the six-eyed man is king.

textures, and eight repetitive synth background music tracks that have to be switched up manually (and no option for custom soundtracks either)—and you get a serviceable, workmanlike wargame. You can't exactly expect big-budget production values from a niche title like this, but perhaps it would have been better to not survey the entire modern arsenal of the world and instead flesh out the look-and-feel a bit more. **–Matthew Gallant**

Champions: Return to Arms

Tunnel vision

★ ★

Genre Expansion Disguised as Sequel **Developer** Snowblind Studios **Publisher** Sony Online Entertainment **Platform** PS2 **ESRB** Teen

With *Champions: Return to Arms*, Snowblind Studios blithely autopilots its way through yet another underlit dungeon-crawling rehash of *Gauntlet*, with tons of clunky inventory management screens, a squirrelly economy, and cheerless grinding to never let you forget you're still in Norrath, everyone's favorite bargain basement of fantasy universe clichés and punishing treadmills. There's probably slightly more to the story than your being sent out to fight evil in a bunch of various "planes" that all resemble the same sprawling tunnel tilesets of 2003's *Champions of Norrath*, but it's hard to detect. Even the monsters look the same. There's something reassuring about a game that respects ancient formulas; it's like a landmark preservation program.

Although the hack-n'-slash twitch-n'-mash gameplay is essentially unchanged from *Champions of Norrath*—i.e., pummeling the X button till your thumb callus bursts, and occasionally hitting triangle or circle while spells and long-range supplies last, which isn't long in the stingy *EverQuest* universe—a number of cosmetic changes help break up the monotony, in an off-white to taupe sort of way. Importing your characters from the first game is still an option, but you can also start fresh ones, such as the all-new Iksar Shaman and the Vah Shir Berserker, or in layman's terms a lizard-man cleric and a feline barbarian. At one point, early on, you're basically asked flat out whether you want to pursue the good or evil "track," but either way, it's pretty much grind, grind, grind. *Champions* combines the shallowness of an action game with the steep but sluggish progress ramp characteristic of MMOs, all set to the backdrop of threadbare illumination and sounds mostly lifted from the earlier game.

Special "medal" rounds, a batch of retro mini-games you access by completing certain levels, range in theme from *Thief*-like stealth challenges to '80s-style arcade jamborees with names like "Frog Stomp." Successfully completing medal rounds, some of which are fairly difficult, can net you anything from attribute boosts to new weapons and unlocked secret levels for online play. *Return to Arms* boasts vastly improved online support than its progenitor, with a greatly streamlined player lobby and full voice-chat support. Playing online easily beats couchside co-op by eliminating camera positioning concerns (your companions simply disappear from view, the way good companions always should), but you can't use your online character in a single-player game or vice versa, which means an automatic doubling of playing time/work-load. Likewise, you can't save a persistent character for the new Arena PvP fighting, even though they level and acquire equipment bonuses to no apparent end.

Champions: Return to Arms is an honorable glitch-free entry in a straightforward, surprise-free genre. Its graphics and sound are four years old, and calling its story thin is an insult to the second dimension. Sticking to formula is not inherently evil, but execution is everything. Michael Caine once admitted to accepting some work because he liked the material, while others, like *Jaws: The Revenge*, he took because hanging out in a nice, warm climate on someone else's dime for a few weeks sounded better than a kick in the eye. Snowblind seems to like Sony's beaches just fine, but *Return to Arms* costs more than ten general admission tickets to *Gigli* and features only slightly more Iksar nipples. **–Kelly Wand**

Rise of the Kasai

Sony/PS2/Mature ★ ★ ★

Rise of the Kasai is a great alternative to the twitch excesses of *Ninja Gaiden*, *God of War*, and *Devil May Cry 3*. This is a more studied way to cut up a thousand enemies with axes, swords, and spears, using a system that doesn't involve reflexes so much as rhythm. It retains all the stoic charm and unique artwork of its predecessor, *Mark of Kri*, but it also adds boss battles and a sometimes awkward team dynamic in which the AI plays half the level for you. Unfortunately, the PS2 has come a long way, and *Rise of the Kasai* hasn't; it looks and plays like a three-year-old game that's sometimes disappointingly repetitive. A good three-year-old game, to be sure, but a bit behind the times. **–Tom Chick**

Ys: Ark of the Napishtim

Konami/PS2/Teen ★ ★ ½

This trifling action game with lite RPG elements keeps the focus on simple and gratifying swordplay. You don't have to go through people's drawers, break open barrels, or run FedEx quests for the townsfolk. Instead, you just tear through a few basic moves to kill lots of monsters and the occasional obligatory boss. For your trouble, you'll earn little, blue crystals you spend to upgrade your three elemental swords. Until the aggravating jumping and falling parts kick in, *Ys* works well enough as a laid-back, hack-n'-slash, Zelda-like game in a small manageable world. **–TC**

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F194-2018A

revisionist history

by David J. Long

The Mark of Kri

Sweetly shattered expectations

A stylish, beautifully painted, peaceful forest scene of classic animation slowly melts into 3D. The barbarian standing in front of you is huge and imposing, but is softened by his cartoon appearance. While controlling this round animated man, you use his familiar—a magical bird whose eyes you can see through—to scout the road. Knowledge in hand of what's ahead, you lope *Lion King*-style down the path. The sentry you discovered has a horn to call for help, but he doesn't see you. Slowly creeping toward him, you throw a muscled arm around his neck and draw your silver steel. With one quick swipe, the man's head springs off and his body gushes crimson as it slumps to the ground. The head and horn plop nearby, and with that one horribly graceful motion, Rau bathed in blood the sweet childhood animation.

> **"Nearly everything about Mark of Kri showed a unique approach."**

The Mark of Kri is an extraordinary game. Developed and published by Sony for the PlayStation 2, it told the story of a barbarian who was the protector of children born with mysterious tattoos. It reveled in its brutality, which was presented through innocent-looking cartoon animation. Most of the game was spent engaging the various patrols and guards you encountered; there were no conventional boss battles. Almost every confrontation provided the opportunity to use stealth to avoid fighting. At one point, you could fire an arrow into a boar, distracting the guards so you could approach them from behind and snap their necks. You also might thin out bad guys from a distance, using a bow which could be carefully aimed for one-shot kills.

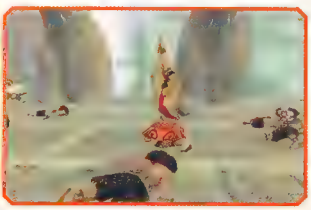
But when it wasn't about silent killing, there was a superb hand-to-hand combat system. You used the right analog stick to select your opponents, who would then display one of the controller buttons floating overhead. You pressed the appropriate button to attack any given enemy. Different weapons would target and attack enemies in different ways. With a huge battle axe, for instance, you could target an entire screen full of opponents at one time. Swordplay was a patient affair though. Hammering on buttons would only get you damaged by a soldier waiting to take advantage of your overzealous attacking. You needed to judiciously block incoming attacks and counterstrike when the time was right. Your success lead to plenty of bloodshed, and often dismemberment. The howling gurgling death of each enemy quickly became a satisfying sound.

Nearly everything about *Mark of Kri* showed a unique approach. The art team featured some classical animation veterans for whom this was their first game. The story was told through still artwork drawn in as you listened to the narrator, who was Rau's bird familiar, telling Rau's tale. You watched the sketch artist filling in the page as the story was filled in for you. These sorts of touches were found throughout the game, giving it a distinct look and feel. The music was nicely interactive with lots of rhythm and drums would build to a crescendo when you entered combat.

Rau was a barbarian in the *Conan* mold, but with an odd international amalgam of Somoan and Mongol influences. His world had an undercurrent of magic, but it wasn't your typical fantasy land of Spellcasters and Elves. It was inhabited mostly by men with swords, axes, and bows. There was a superb sense of place, partly familiar but wholly unique, to the entire game. You fought among the trees and rocks, then single-handedly stormed a mountain fortress in the snow. Each mission took you to a new piece of Rau's world and unveiled a little more of the game's backstory.

You'll often find *Mark of Kri* in bargain bins for about $10. Fortunately, its marginal success warranted a sequel. The internal Sony team responsible for the first game was even able to set up their own studio, Bottlerocket Entertainment, for the sequel. Although the *Prince of Persia* games have stolen some of its thunder, it's still notable for breaking out of the traditional themes and introducing a new way to fight. It also introduces Rau's sister, one of the main characters in the upcoming *Rise of the Kasai*. And given the first game's ending, there's still a lot to learn about Rau and his world.

Do you have an old-school console favorite that only you seem to remember? Let us in on the secret at editor@cgonline.com



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applied game theory BY HENRY JENKINS AND KURT SQUIRE

Broken Rules

Finding meaning in the violent lands of Azeroth

A few months back, we used the term "meaningful violence" to describe a problem with violence in games. It's not that games shouldn't be violent, it's that precious few games use violence to emotional effect. In this column, we want to use this idea of meaningful violence to examine core issues in game theory, namely questions around the so-called ludology and narratology debate (which we also described in an earlier column).

So far, this tension between narrative and play has been framed as choosing between two polar opposites. In reality, games are often most interesting when narrative and play interact to create compelling experience.

When most people think of narrative, they think of the plot structures taught in English 101. In reality, narrative works in much more complex ways. It's also about characters, their motivations, the worlds they inhabit, and the webs of meaning we make in their interactions.

Rather than juxtaposing narrative and gameplay, it's more productive to look for examples where they can work together. Consider Always Black's instantly classic essay, "Bow Nigger" (at alwaysblack.com/blackbox/bownigger.html), which tells a story of a "would-be Jedi" shouting racial epitaphs, and the protagonist using his knowledge of game rules, game culture, and the Jedi system to uphold the Jedi way. Black shows that what makes *Jedi Knight 2* compelling (for him) is not simply his knowledge of the fighting mechanics, or even the surrounding game culture, but how they interact with the *Star Wars* narrative to create an experience where he can be a Jedi.

To take a very different example, consider player-versus-player combat in *World of WarCraft*. One place where *WoW* has not been universally adored is in its PvP system. As *Computer Games* acknowledged while awarding it game of the year, PvP is essentially meaningless. On the micro level, most fights simply come down to level; a level 52 will beat a level 45 every time (which players call ganking). Nothing is really at stake in a PvP fight; you die and lose a little time. Although, after one night of 15 gankings in a 4-hour period, it didn't seem so trivial, prompting one author to want to call this column "World of Gankcraft."

But the PvP game is also meaningless on the macro level as there is nothing at stake in the Horde/Alliance battle. Nothing that happens in the PvP metagame has any consequence for me, my guild, or the world as a whole. On the short term, I might defend a hunting area, and try to establish a reputation, but because the game is constructed so that people will have multiple characters, I'm not even certain I'll ever see my opponents or their clan again in game. The lack of chat means that there is no social game, so essentially, most PvP game play is just an interruption of the PvE game.

"... after one night of 15 gankings in a 4-hour period... one author wanted to call this column 'World of Gankcraft.'"

Part of the problem here is a mismatch between game balancing and the narrative. If you pay attention to the narrative, you have every reason to kill opposing faction players on sight. Game balancing, on the other hand, makes 98% of PvP battles meaningless until you are level 58. Defenders say that the PvP becomes meaningful at level 50, but saying "the game works after 500 hours of play" is obviously less than ideal.

Most people's first reaction is to fix game balance (which isn't a bad idea). Limiting PvP to within 10 levels or implementing an honor system are good ideas, but they fundamentally break the narrative. If I'm a level 60 Druid, it makes sense for me to prevent some little Troll from leveling to the point where they can chop down the forests, obliterate the landscape, and kill me. Either solution makes the whole thing feel even less meaningful.

Another option is to use narrative elements to create a meaningful context. For example, one of us stumbled into Stranglethorn Vale and found a "rebel quest," which involved raiding a small horde settlement, obviously a dangerous thing. Mid-raid, a level 60 Horde came by, and demolished the raiders. Not surprisingly, it felt fair, even meaningful in this context. Accepting that quest was a

choice to do something dangerous, and there was a narrative reason for the activity.

In effect, the big nasty Horde character becomes an elite boss. Being one of a dozen screaming little Alliance characters didn't feel like ganking; it turns out that "just trying to get away" can even be fun. Even more critically, it created a narrative context whereby any future ganking in the area was also meaningful. Whether any future Horde character was ganking or defending his beloved little settlement is irrelevant; the Alliance player perceives it as a possibility.

When a game is broken, game designers often rush to change the game rules as the solution. Often, revisiting how story elements might be used in conjunction with rule changes can be even more powerful. This points to deeper issues for game theorists. Clearly, game rules and narratives are each important, and as a field, perhaps we would be better off investing time in understanding how they work together rather than squabbling over differences. ■

Henry Jenkins and **Kurt Squire** are co-directors of The Education Arcade, which is based at MIT and the University of Wisconsin-Madison. More information on the program can be found at educationarcade.org

view from the middle BY KEN LEVINE

Hype 101

Starring the wiggling butt of Deion Sanders

Ah, can you smell it in the air? That sharp, piquant odor of a burgeoning generation of gaming consoles! Can't you almost hear the errant boasts, the vague promises, and the rhetorical grandstanding that has come to define such an event.

Listen, I'm all for a bit of hype. In fact, I wrote a column a couple of months ago that defended hype as an integral portion of the first part of videogame enjoyment: the savoring. But there's hype, and then there's something approaching religious mania. Let's jump back a few years, shall we, to March 2002 and the *Newsweek* cover story on the then-upcoming launch of the PlayStation 2.

First, there's the vapor-hype; the one whose claims never (or mostly never) come to fruition:

> "... the most significant aspect of the PS2 might be its ability to hook into the Internet, making it a 'Trojan horse' to bring online gaming, e-commerce, Web browsing, e-mail and downloading of music, software and video into the home."

Then there's the "Did this guy see the same movie I did" quote:

> "'You can communicate to a new cybercity,' gushes Ken Kutaragi, the visionary behind the PlayStation. 'This will be the ideal home server. Did you see the movie *The Matrix*? Same interface. Same concept. Starting from next year, you can jack into The Matrix!'"

And then there's there "Dude, if I completely fluff your platform to *Newsweek*, can you give me a break on licensing fees?" quote:

> "It's historic, a mass-market appliance that fundamentally changes society in the way the printing press did. This is a new canvas for humanity that takes us back to our nature."

As I said, I'm not afraid of hype. I've been known to gush enthusiastically about a product or two. But "a new canvas for humanity that takes us back to our nature?" When was this conclusion reached? After a late night session of *Fantavision?*

Now that I've made fun of people, let's talk about what really happened during the PS2/Xbox generation. Videogames grew up. For the first time, we had both relatively infinite storage (DVD) combined with actual 3D hardware. Gone were the pseudo 3D Escher textures of the PS1, and the financially and creatively limiting cartridges of the otherwise capable N64. That, combined with the fact that these things actually played movies, meant they were more than welcome in the living room. They were becoming essential.

"... there's hype, and then there's something approaching religious mania."

The console manufacturers also got their crap together on the business side. Videogames became a real business in grown-up companies like Microsoft and Sony. Mega-publishers started clone factories in the South Pole to produce a limitless army of 22-year-old programmers whose single career goal was making Deion Sander's butt wiggle in time to the latest Nelly hit. And successful franchises morphed into the videogame equivalent of prize stud bulls, pumping out profitable offspring as frequently as possible until the genetic stock was beat into unrecognizable goo with surnames like "X-2" and "Zero Extreme."

While the original PlayStation was the angry young man at Sony, rebellious, hungry, and eager to make its mark in the world, the PS2 was more like the 1960's hippie settling down with an SUV and a 4 bedroom/2.5 bathroom house in Long Island. Where the PS1 invigorated the world with hundreds of radical new (and financially successful!) concepts like 3D platformers, dancing games, hardcore racers, strat-

egy RPGs, and stealth actioners, the PS2's harvest has been noticeably short of innovation.

Don't get me wrong: they've taken the time to polish and focus these concepts, yielding such "Best of Breed" titles like *Ratchet and Clank*, *Dark Cloud 2*, *Beyond Good and Evil*, and *Disgaea*. But companies finding their way take chances, and success has a way of breeding caution and complacency. Ask Eric Clapton.

Another note of concern is that graphical appeal is starting to hit the point of diminishing returns. Frankly, the games on Xbox and PS2 still look really good. What is the incentive to upgrade? Is something launching this year going to look as stunning as *Halo*? Once you've already played the game with the decent videocard, unlimited storage, and an art budget of $15 million, you can't help but get a little jaded.

But that doesn't mean there aren't other fields to plow. Try this one on: Physics are the new graphics. While demanding on processor power, guess what these new platforms are going to have under the hood? And physics rendering tends to be a much more objective process, unlike the "beauty is in the eye of the beholder" world of 3D engines. That means lots of really smart people working toward the same goal: simulational fidelity. And whether you've spent the last year playing *Half-Life 2* or *Katamari Damacy*, you know there's gold in them thar hills. ■

Ken Levine is the General Manager and Creative Director of Irrational Games.

random incoherence BY KELLY WAND

Toothless Bloodstains

Where did all the ripping flesh go?

Games aren't nearly as bloody as they used to be, so our culture suffers. There's still tons of killing, bludgeoning, kicking, stabbing, garroting, incinerating, and falling off cliffs; just not as many scarlet particle routines and brain chunks as back in the day. Wasn't *Doom 3* supposed to raise the bar? Weren't all those Marines introduced just so we could see them get stapled, mangled, and juiced at some point? When did dynamic lighting become more important to designers than chainsaws slashing through hyper-realistic teeth? Games without blood are like rock without soul (i.e., pop).

Glaring exceptions that prove the rule (unanimously pitched and marketed as exceptions) leap immediately to mind: *Grand Theft Auto Des Moines, Postal: S.A.S.E.*, and *Barbie and the Mystery of the Missing Stallion*. But such gore-spattered nuggets are all too rare in today's complex political climate of fear of the devil. How did we let this happen? Were spawn camping and rolling for caster trash so absorbing we forgot to post someone on watch? Typical.

Games used to be the most daring form of entertainment. Then the sanitization demagogues moved in. Now that we finally have the technology to do vertex-shaded justice to arterial sprays and precision-charred ligaments, designers are politely but firmly exhorted to hold back so they can get the "Teen" rating. "Teen"-rated games are pretty innocuous, but since many involve conflict of one kind or another, they're slowly becoming the new "Mature." And the infantile "Everyone" is gaining dominance. As a result, developers have become increasingly beholden to arbitrary criteria decided upon by a small non-elected group of soccer moms from Wisconsin (not that there's anything wrong with soccer).

Wal-Mart is admittedly the source of all evil, but the more troubling issue is that games are so desperate to have the cachet of movies, they're no longer willing to enjoy the virtues of being a young industry for which the rules are still being written. Instead of reinventing the art of storytelling for the cyber generation, game developers aspire more and more to simply make the equivalent of bad movies in story, in dialogue, and in visual design. It's an exceptionally lame time to be emulating movies, which are in a similar creative freefall as they, in turn, aspire to be (and often are) nothing more than TV commercials. Marketing may have replaced religion as the spiritual movement of choice in America, but just like their predecessors, the new priests have awful taste.

"Maybe it's time we got offended by them, and started going on The View to demonize D.A.R.E., Joan of Arcadia, and dressing for the elements."

To take just one current example, H.G. Wells' 1898 horror novella *War of the Worlds* featured, in addition to the dumbest *dues ex machina* ending ever, a Martian superweapon described as a "poisonous black smoke" that wiped out urban populations in an ominous fog of plague-carrying doom. Wells' subtext was both obvious and deliberate, not to mention prophetic. But Steven Spielberg, a literacy advocate who for the recent re-re-

lease of *E.T.* boldly replaced Dee Wallace's line, "You can't go [trick or treating] as a terrorist!" with the much more topical and hilarious, "You can't go as a hippie!," won't be showing any poisonous black smoke in this summer's *Worlds* remake. The mere concept was considered too hardcore for PG-13. In other words, we're now more uptight than Victorian England.

Poisonous black clouds are admittedly the source of all evil, but the marketing clowns they symbolize are only following the cabbage. The true villains are the companies themselves, for sucking up in the first place to the likes of Terry Rakolta, Joe Lieberman, Tipper Gore, and other celebrity complainers. It's doubtful their capitulations came about as a result of thoughtfully evaluating the strength and logic of the arguments; the voices raised in protest just happened to be shrill. The decks have always been stacked against the apathetic, the unoffended, and the tolerant; they're too quiet.

Being offended by something has never been easier or more in vogue in America, because empty-headed soapboxes provide just the smokescreens news and media outlets thirst for. Apparently, nothing scares educated MBA grads more than an Iowa senator's wife caterwauling that a product made their hot flashes lukewarm. After all, it does say in the First Amendment that all citizens have the right to never be offended by anything, so long as the U.S. Government can help it.

The U.S. Government is admittedly the source of all evil, but as merely a glorified cabal of the marketing clowns already cited above, it hardly merits a paragraph of its own—what does is the persistent fallacy that less fake violence is somehow better. When the R-rated *Saving Private Ryan* was whitewashed into the terrifically intense, but still "Teen"-rated *Medal of Honor* by sanitizing the gore, it cheapened the point of the film's opening sequence by purposely denying kids an honest look at the chaotic horrors of modern combat. Maybe by overprotecting them from fundamental realities that our ancestors had to grasp early on to survive, watchdog groups, ratings boards, and content restrictors are dampening their mental growth in general, and certainly their ability to make moral judgments of life and death. There's never been such a jarring disconnect between the amount of real-life bloodshed going on in plain view and simultaneous hand-wringing over regulating the content of juvenile fiction. It's making us look bad to the dolphins.

Maybe presenting hyper-realistic blood and gore in a work of interactive fiction, whether stylized or understated, is sometimes more dramatic, more interesting, more socially responsible, and funnier. Maybe it's time to fight fire with fire. Maybe gamers should have better games than soccer moms. Maybe it's time *we* got offended by them, and started going on *The View* to demonize D.A.R.E., *Joan of Arcadia*, and dressing for the elements. They wouldn't stop baking us cookies over that, I'm almost sure of it. ■

Next month: Same rambling, smaller font! 100% content-free! Now with extra non-sequiturs!

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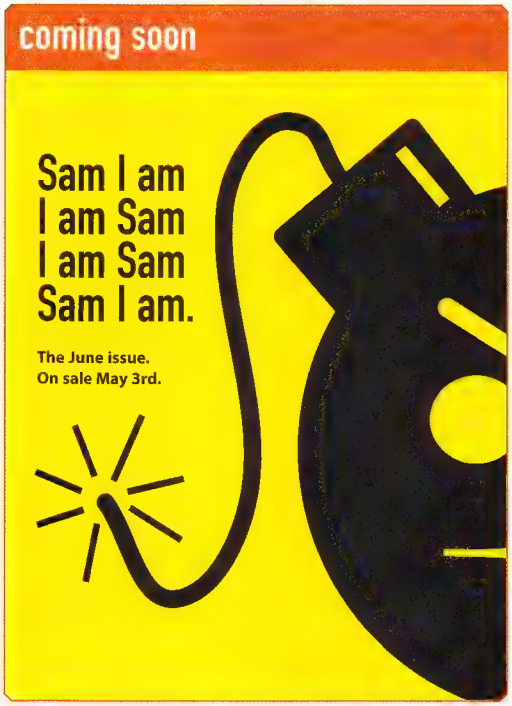

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three finger salute BY TOM CHICK

Just Games

The end of the platform wars

"Just flip back a few pages," I say to my friend Trevor. "Did you see what they're doing? It's a great day for platform agnostics."

There's a tumbleweed-sized mass of cables in front of my TV. Trevor is trying to extricate a pair of Xbox controllers so I can show him *Phantom Dust*. "What's platform agnostic supposed to mean again?" he asks.

"It means I've got a gamepad for my PC and a mouse for my PlayStation 2."

Trevor follows the cable and somehow comes to a Gamecube controller. "Why is this out?" he asks.

"*Resident Evil 4*."

"Oh yeah, right. I forgot that was Gamecube. You have a mouse for your PS2?"

"No, but I could. They make a mouse. Well, they used to."

"What for?" he asks.

"I think there was a PlayStation version of *X-COM*."

"That's all?"

"As far as I know. I'm pretty sure you can get a keyboard, too," I add.

"For a PlayStation?"

"No, for a Dreamcast."

"What for?" he asks.

"I think it was for *Typing of the Dead*. Also, you could web browse. Now that's platform agnosticism."

"Did you ever do it?"

"Web browse on a Dreamcast? What for? I had a PC. Besides, I wasn't a full-blown platform agnostic back then. I was a PC gamer with a Dreamcast and a PlayStation. Now I'm full-blown platform agnostic. I can play *Jak III* one minute and *Civilization III* the next. It doesn't matter to me. It's all the same. I can go from *Pikmin 2* to *Half-Life 2*."

"That can't be healthy. I think they have drugs for that. Zoloft and stuff." He's separated the Xbox controller out of the tangled nest, but it's wrapped up with the cable for a PS2 controller. They're like mating pythons.

"I don't need to clear my palate or take a breather," I boast. "No transition period. I can play *Animal Crossing* at 8:00 and then *Far Cry* at 8:30, without missing a beat. Just one, then the other."

He's dangling the controllers and letting them unwind themselves. "Sounds like *Animal Crossing* doesn't last very long."

"I can't stand that game. I'm just making a point. We've won, us platform agnostics."

"Good, because it's a silly argument and I'm tired of hearing it." He finally hands me a PS2 controller.

"What's this?"

"That's yours," he says. "Now I'm getting mine."

"Dude, *Phantom Dust* is Xbox."

"Aw, man, I thought it was Japanese."

"Besides, this is one of the old grey controllers. We only use these when we're doing something with the multitap."

"You have a multitap?"

"Somewhere. I think it's back with those old videocards and sticks of RAM. Back where I keep the *Steel Battalion* controller."

"Here. Xbox controller."

"I can't use this. It's one of the big ones."

"You're awful particular for an agnostic."

I ignore his comment while he gets back to the untangling. "Platform doesn't matter anymore," I declare. "Just genre. Platform is irrelevant."

"Next thing, you're going to be calling them all videogames."

"No, this isn't anarchy. We still need separate words.

> **"I'm pretty sure the New York Times calls them all videogames. Now that's agnostic."**

Videogames are console games, PC games are PC games."

"I'm pretty sure the *New York Times* calls them all videogames. Now that's agnostic."

"No, that's mainstream. They're all games, not videogames. Just games."

He hands me my controller. We're playing *Phantom Dust*, building our decks, picking the spells we want.

"What about chess?" Trevor asks.

"You want to play chess?"

"No, what do you call that? A game, right?"

"Chess is a board game," I explain. "Like *Settlers of Catan*."

"We can't be just gaming. We need a new word so we're separate from board games, gambling, sports, and whatnot."

"No, we don't need a new word. We need to keep using this one until everyone else lays off. Eventually, those other people will go away and get their own words. We'll be gaming. Just gaming. We play games, like *Doom* and *Halo* and *Rise of Nations*. Games. Board games, sports, gambling, they can all be their own things."

Trevor hasn't put any defense spells in his deck, so I win five rounds in a row. Plus he doesn't have any idea what he's doing.

"Okay, that's enough of this. Let's go play a PC game now." ■

Computer Games Magazine (ISSN 1546–5101) is published monthly by Strategy Plus, Inc., 65 Millet Street, Suite 203, Richmond, VT, 05477. Subscription rate is $19.97 for a one year subscription, $31.97 Canada. Periodical postage paid at Richmond, VT 05477 and additional mailing offices. **Produced in U.S.A.** **Postmaster:** Send address changes to Computer Games, PO Box 1965, Marion, OH 43306.

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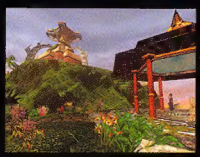

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